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BY

GEORGE DILNOT

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AUTHOR OF "SCOTLAND YARD" ETC.

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CHAPTER I

The sun had beaten down the shadow of the trees till the orchard lay a patchwork of purple blotches and vivid green sward. Foxgloves and ox-eye daisies bowed daintily to the caress of a grateful breeze. Strang cast a swift glance about him, flung open the gate, and strolled down the slope to the ha-ha which divided the orchard from the lawn.

He felt the magic of the open air thrill upon his jaded nerves like a draught of exhilarating wine. It was good to feel once more the kiss of fresh air, good to have in one's nostrils the smell of the wholesome brown earth, good to hear the song of the birds.

Although he felt sub-consciously the velvet touch of Nature's fingers, he was still out of harmony with his surroundings. His fists opened and clenched again, and a smouldering fury dwelt in his eyes. Ruin, or the appearance of ruin, comes hardly to nine-and-twenty, and John

Strang took it hardly. He was fighting now to throw off the grip of an overwhelming passion ere he faced the man he had come to find.

With that first quick shock—that polite, formal broker's letter that showed him he had been tricked—the world seemed to have given way beneath his feet. For months he had been living with all his faculties immersed in the fierce surge of war. His work for his country had left him little leisure for other things. He had thought himself indifferent to money—yet now that it was gone, he found that money meant many things. Yet the loss would have rankled less but for two things: The first was the subtle treachery by which he had been duped. The second was the girl.

Strang was not immaculate. In the desperate impulse of rage that had shaken him when his eyes had been opened to Brockford's trickery, murder had not been far from his mind. Even now the right-hand pocket of his jacket sagged with an unaccustomed weight. He drew out a small automatic pistol, stared at it uncomprehendingly for a second, and then jerked it far from him. He would run no further risk of that temptation.

He thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and for awhile he stood immobile as a statue until his mood should have cooled. A ray of sunlight filtered through the boughs of the apple tree under which he stood and picked out the clean, straight lines of his figure. There was character in the

set face—a hint of a strong personality that would have arrested an observer. The dominant, dogged chin, the firm mouth told of resolute will. The grey eyes had—though it was absent now—a trick of laughter, and the curly hair seemed to give a certain quality of boyishness. Sun and fresh air had tanned his face. His grey tweed suit told of deft tailorship.

To the public, John Strang was little known save as a young civil engineer who, before the war, had carried out a few hazardous experiments in flight. But to a limited circle of experts he was something more than an airman. For a very brief period he had held a commission in the Royal Naval Air Service, and then, unaccountably enough to some people, he had resigned. Only in service circles was it noted that his resignation followed hard upon the death of Dick Balvil, his partner and friend.

On that August day when war broke out, the partners had spun a coin, and Strang had gone to the fighting line while Balvil remained to continue the research and experiment that was to give England an air weapon more deadly even than Zeppelins—an aeroplane of perfect automatic stability that would hover practically motionless in the air. The stimulant of war had brought Government attention to what had hitherto been regarded as a crank's ideal, and scepticism and indifference had been alike overcome.

Balvil had worked out the invention to the

verge of practicability when fate intervened. A defective strut and a careless mechanic had sent him five thousand feet to death, and to Strang had been left the task of completing the invention.

For that he had left active service. A civilian, it was reasoned by the authorities, would attract less notice from the emissaries of Germany's espionage system than a man directly associated with the air services. And now something like success had attended Strang's labours. Only the finishing touches to the plans were needed.

But Strang's thoughts were not of his aerial triumph. His mission to Oakden Park occupied his mind. Presently he shrugged his shoulders and, with a little laugh of self-contempt, wheeled about abruptly and strode to where the house gleamed white against the shimmering green background of trees.

He had taken perhaps a dozen steps, when a cry from a thatched summer-house made him halt. A slender tornado in white discharged itself towards him, and he found himself looking into the eager, laughing blue eyes and the piquant oval face of Betty Carstairs.

"Hallo, Mr. Casual! Where on earth have you sprung from? Why couldn't you let us know you were coming down? Give an account of yourself at once," she demanded, and slipped her arm through his with a delightful air of proprietorship.

A flash of surprise had crossed Jack Strang's

face at the sudden appearance of the girl. Here in person was an aspect of the affair that he had as yet scarcely dared to consider.

"Why, Betty, I thought you were in Devonshire," he stammered. "I was — writing to you."

He felt a tiny pressure on his arm. "And glum enough you look over your disappointment, my lad," she rallied him. "You might pretend to be pleased, anyway. The Pellens have got scarlet fever or measles or something horrid at their place, and wired to put me off at the last moment. So here I am, and if you're here for the week-end, you've just got to make the best of it, Master Melancholy."

Strang schooled himself to a smile. Her unexpected presence created a complication that he had not foreseen. He had taken it for granted that she would be in Devonshire and that he would be able to settle accounts with Richard Brockford before it came to an explanation with his stepdaughter. For a clearer sight had come to him now; probing to the root of the trouble that had befallen him, he beheld the slim innocence of Betty Carstairs.

But for her he had never been so easy a dupe to Brockford. She it was who, with her unconscious beauty, her ready comradeship, and her imaginative intelligence, had blinded him to the ordinary precautions of business. She it was too who had made the knowledge of ruin so bitter. Both he and Dick Balvil had agreed not to seek a

profit from their invention through their country's extremity. He was, to all intents, a penniless man.

True it was that it was her own stepfather who had lured him to disaster. Indeed, despite his white-hot anger, he recognised now that Brockford had used her as a blind for his own swindling operations. Neither of them guessed that they had been deliberately flung together—that Brockford had pulled the strings for his own peculiar purposes. Strang knew now—but the dainty hoyden peering at him from under the white sun-bonnet still held her trust in the man she called father.

The smile died as he reflected that he must tell her. He had shrunk from the ordeal, and had blessed the fate that had taken her to Devonshire. There the worst could have been broken to her by letter. Strang was no moral coward, yet now the time had come he stood tongue-tied and confused. His courage oozed out of him.

"I'm not here for the week-end, Betty," he said haltingly; "only an hour or two. I've come to—on business."

For all her buoyant vitality the girl was not wanting in perception. The laughter faded from her face. Slowly she withdrew her arm, and gravely scrutinised him from under her long lashes. A stray wisp of wavy hair had blown across her forehead.

"What is wrong, Boy?" she demanded. "There's something the matter."

Strang suppressed an inclination to catch her in his arms and evade her question with kisses.

" Betty," he said slowly, and paused. It was very difficult. His forehead had become suddenly wet. " I've come down because—because all my money is gone."

She stared at him, and a couple of little wrinkles marked her white forehead. " You've lost your money? " she repeated.

He nodded awkwardly. Then suddenly she was in his arms, her slender arms were about his neck, and he could feel her heart throbbing against his.

" You silly boy. Father always said you were no business man and would get into a muddle some time. He was saying so at breakfast this morning. You've come down to consult him, of course. He'll soon put things right. Let's go and see him now."

" He said that, did he ? " he asked, startled a little. Very gently he detached her and held her hands in his. " Betty, dear, he cannot put things right now." He lifted his shoulders heavily. " He knows—he—he knew."

The blow took her unawares. The colour surged from her face, and the hands he held became limp and cold. It was not the words so much as the tone in which they were uttered that had given her a glimpse of the truth. For much of the bitterness that Strang felt had at last broken into his voice.

" Do you mean the—the——" Her voice broke.

He squared his shoulders. "Mr. Brockford is responsible, Betty. The money has gone out of my pockets into his. Oh, it was all commonplace enough. I was a fool—I neglected the most elementary precautions. He was your father."

His grip tightened as she swayed a little.

"He has cheated you somehow?" she asked dully. "Oh, Jack, isn't there a mistake?"

"There's no mistake," he replied dryly, "though I dare say it's all legal enough." An overwhelming gust of passion shook him, and he pulled her almost roughly towards him. "Will it make any difference, dear?" he demanded. "Must it make any difference? You are your own mistress . . ."

To her life had been myrtle and roses. In her one-and-twenty years of life, save only her mother's death, no trouble had come to her. Of her own father she had no memory. She had been much left to her own devices, yet, looking back over the years, she had no fault to find with Richard Brockford. He was her one near relative. If he had not been demonstratively affectionate he had been passively generous. He had never put obstacles in the way of her indulging any girlish whim or caprice. That his treatment of her might be due to indifference had never occurred to her.

She had suddenly been brought to the verge of a great decision. Her intuition rather than her reason insisted on the parting of the ways.

If Jack Strang was right—yet he might be mistaken. It was difficult for her to conceive Brockford as a thief—a mean thief. She tried to visualise the words, and a little shiver ran through her. Whatever he was, he was her father.

Strang had caught her to his breast. " Must it make any difference to us ? " he repeated. The words seemed to her very far away.

" I—don't—know, Boy," she cried, and strove to release herself. " Let me go. I must think. Go away now."

He bent and kissed her on the forehead ere he set her free. Then, without another word, he turned and strode swiftly towards the house.

With heavy, dull steps, Betty Carstairs returned to the summer-house.

CHAPTER II

THE little ferret eyes of Patrick Shaugnessy gleamed in humorous appreciation. He flung back his head in a gust of swift laughter, low, appreciative.

"'Pon my soul, Brockford, you're in a class by yourself. One of these days you'll be hanged—or knifed, more likely. If ever young Strang gets to guess——"

The other man waved a slim white hand in a deprecating gesture. "I'll chance that, Shaugnessy," he said smoothly. "I expect he knows something already. I don't think that will matter much. Anyway, it's up to you now—if I misfire."

There was a grating metallic quality in the voice, a cold harshness that almost indicated the soul of the man. There were folk in the city of London who might lift their eyebrows questioningly when Richard Brockford's name was mentioned, and there were stories—possibly true—that bore tribute equally to his ruthlessness and his financial sagacity. Of neither of these facts was he ignorant. But the glades of Oakden Park and a sumptuous house in Mount Street, Park Lane, went far to stifle criticism of his City methods.

He stood now with one elbow resting on the carved mantelpiece, looking down, with his lips tight drawn in complacency, upon his companion. A slim-built man with shoulders slightly bowed, he was dressed with scrupulous care. The thin grey hair had been carefully brushed over a high forehead. Eyes green, penetrating, arbitrary, looked out of a lean face. The cheek bones were emphasised, and the thin lips of the mouth were tight pressed.

Shaugnessy was a different type of man. His clothes—a suit of light flannel—seemed as though they had been flung on his rather stout figure. He looked rather like a fat clerk. Yet in a certain unostentatious bureau in Rotterdam, whose principals said they were export agents and who corresponded in cipher and in person with the highest officials of the German Empire, Shaugnessy was ranked high. A reliable spy is a rare possession for even the most highly organised secret service. And since the opening of the war, when German emissaries in Great Britain had been harried with relentless vigour, he had become ten times more valuable.

Courage alone cannot make a competent spy, but it is an essential asset in time of war. And it cannot be denied that the fat man had courage. He had seen the Tower ditch — as a casual spectator in pre-war days—and he had few doubts that a slip might one day take him there again—as Carl Lody and other colleagues of his had been taken—in the dawn with a white bandage

round their eyes. In face of this, Shaugnessy stayed on.

Possibly the man found a certain joy in his work. Certainly he was not a German, and he was prepared to prove it. He was a British subject with a right to all the traditional liberty of his country. He could even have proved his right to the name by which he was known. All these things were very elementary precautions. Possibly he could equally as well have arranged some other name, for it is more than doubtful that he was a Shaugnessy by right of birth.

He crossed his legs and leaned back luxuriously in a big arm-chair. Deliberately he passed a cigar case to Brockford, selected a smoke himself, cut off the end, and applied a match.

"I want to know," he said succinctly.

"Oh, it's been simple enough." Brockford made a gesture with his cigar. "Only a question of ground bait. But don't you run away with the idea that Strang's a fool. He's far from that. There's stuff in him."

"Yes. You're a damned clever man, Brockford." In Shaugnessy's tone was an open sneer which the financier chose to ignore.

He jerked his head. "Thanks. I believe I deserve a little credit. When this business is pulled off, you—or your people—will owe me something."

"I hate to seem curious," insisted the Irishman.

Brockford smiled. "Put it down to Betty," he said. "She was my trump card. Once he

met her he was like a moth round a candle. As a matter of duty, when they became engaged I had to ask him about his means. He had a few thousands. I pointed out that the man who married Betty had to have a substantial sum behind him. I let that sink in for a day or two, and then gave him hints for speculation. He won at first——"

Shaugnessy grinned. "I have known that trick pulled off on Atlantic liners on a smaller scale at a game of poker. But small gambling sharps don't get much shrift nowadays."

The other ignored the interruption. "Then I introduced the question of Cinch Tight gold shares. I had some by me. He bit hard. He has put every penny he's got into them."

A whistle puckered the Irishman's fat lips.

"And you say he's not a fool," he cried. "Why, it must have been one of the easiest things even you ever handled. Ten minutes' inquiry would have shown him that Cinch Tight shares were dear as waste-paper."

For the first time Brockford smiled. "There was Betty," he said. "It would have been disrespectful for him to be too cautious in dealing with his prospective father-in-law, wouldn't it?"

The other's eyes had narrowed to mere slits, and he scrutinised Brockford coldly, insolent. He puffed out a cloud of smoke and withdrew his cigar before replying.

"You're as cold-blooded as a snake," he said. "You're using the girl to trap him, and you'll

shelter behind her if anything goes wrong. I'm no saint, but——" He jammed his cigar back in his mouth without finishing his sentence.

"Nothing can go wrong," observed Brockford. "I've carried out my part of the bargain, and it's up to you now."

"H'm," grunted Shaugnessy non-committally.

"He hasn't a penny left," went on Brockford, "and he's more likely to be reached by a reasonable offer now than ever he was. If his plans are as good as you think they are, you'll get 'em. If I've judged him right, he'll be down red-hot when he hears from the brokers. I'll try and talk him round—if I can. He'll learn that I too have been hard hit through my mistaken opinion of these shares. With twenty thousand pounds dangled in front of him and Betty in the background, you ought to be able to persuade him to leave a few diagrams and plans lying about. That's all you want."

"H'm," grunted Shaugnessy again. "You may find him easy to trail round your fingers in financial matters, but when it comes to flying business, it is quite a different thing. There's something big on, of course. What it is we can only guess, but we know well enough Strang is the key man. He's in touch with both the War Office and the Admiralty. We've tried most ways, and if this scheme of yours fails——" He paused significantly.

The elder man bit his lower lip. "All that's nothing to do with me," he put in quickly.

"Your business is—your business. I don't know what you want with Strang, and I'm not seeking information. That's all."

Shaugnessy made a clicking noise with his tongue. "Why not cut out the cant?" he demanded brusquely. "You remind me of the man who kisses his thumb rather than a testament in the witness-box because he won't commit perjury. You're talking mere foolishness, and you know it. You're in this game up to the neck." He repeated the phrase with emphasis, "Up to the neck. If you think you can bag this fellow's money and then sit quiet and play pussy-in-the-corner, you're away out, I'm telling you. If he doesn't fall for my proposition it's not the finish."

"Not the slightest reason to get excited, my dear Shaugnessy," interpolated Brockford suavely. "Of course I'll do everything I can to help you—everything in reason. Now, there's Betty. Naturally I—I consider myself a model parent—could not consent that she should marry a man with nothing."

"Let's leave Miss Carstairs out of the question," said Shaugnessy impatiently. "If Strang is obstinate, there's still a shot or two in the locker."

Brockford's green eyes swerved sideways in a swift appraising glance at his companion. He guessed vaguely what was being hinted at. His hand trembled as he dropped the end of his cigar into an ash-tray.

"You won't use violence," he said uneasily.

"You see . . . on my property . . . why, it might even implicate me."

The Irishman snorted disgust. "You've got a deep respect for that yellow hide of yours, Brockford. Don't you worry. If I've got to run a risk it won't be tenderness for you that'll affect my plans. All the same, I'll be discreet. There's going to be no general court-martial in mine, thank you. But matters are too close up to permit of shilly-shally. My friends want to know how far there is anything in this new aeroplane business, and they usually get what they want. If you fail, I'm going to have a shot."

The lean fingers of the financier drummed on the carved mantelpiece. He knew Shaugnessy. He cared little whether violence was used as a last resort to obtain the secret or not, but he did not care about the unpleasantness that might arise if it were bungled. A general court-martial or even civil proceedings were even less to his taste than to Shaugnessy. There was some truth in the taunts of the other man. He was afraid—deadly afraid. But he had gone too far to recede.

Whatever reply he intended to make was never uttered. A tap at the door broke the conversation, and a servant entered bearing a card on a salver. But there was little need of an announcement. Hard on the heels of the man was Strang.

Brockford gave an exclamation, and advanced

towards the visitor with outstretched hand. He beamed with a kind of icy geniality.

"Why, Jack, my boy, this is just the thing. I was thinking of running up to town to see you to-day, but this is better. I don't wonder you look cut up. I've had a letter from Shaw & Levison myself to-day."

Just the right touch of hurt surprise appeared in his face as it became evident that Strang would not take his hand. The young man's gaze rested for a moment on Shaugnessy, who had tilted back his chair and was looking at the ceiling. Brockford's eyes followed his.

"Forgive me," he exclaimed. "You don't know my friend, Mr. Shaugnessy. Shaugnessy, this is Mr. John Strang."

Strang bowed formally. But even if he had wished, he could not have ignored the Irishman's hand as he had that of Brockford. A florid, podgy fist clung to his. For the moment he feared that Mr. Shaugnessy would slap him on the back. Shaugnessy did give that impression sometimes.

"I'm delighted to know you, Mr. Strang," he said. His voice was well modulated. "I've heard of you, of course. In these days of newspapers a man of your qualities can hardly escape being talked about. My old friend here"—he beamed paternally on Brockford—"has been telling me that you've both burned yourselves lately."

Strang felt a fresh access of rage. What

right had Brockford to discuss his business with a stranger.

"Indeed," he said coldly.

Brockford came to the rescue. "You'll excuse us, Shaugnessy; we shan't be five minutes."

Shaugnessy gave a final wring to the young man's hand.

"Certainly," he murmured, and a fat smile broke all over his face. "See you again, then, Mr. Strang. I may run across you later on. Good-bye."

As the door closed behind him, Strang turned to the financier.

"And now, Mr. Brockford," he said grimly.

CHAPTER III

It was shortly after four o'clock that afternoon that a ticket-collector at Waterloo, stepping into a first-class compartment of a train, laid his hand on the shoulder of a sleeping passenger. The figure tumbled loosely to his touch, and the collector, with a gasp, blundered out of the carriage and raced at a lumbering trot towards a platform inspector.

Within an hour Fleet Street was aware, in its own particular slang, that a "big story had broken loose." By the disposition of a journalistic providence, it was a slack day for war news, and to the newspapers a mystery is never to be despised. A well-dressed man of middle age had been found shot in a railway carriage, said the early editions, and some time later London became aware that the victim was a Mr. Richard Brockford, of Oakden Park, near Haslemere, and that he lay unconscious and in a critical condition at St. Thomas's Hospital.

"It is by no means clear," said the *Evening Wire*, "how Mr. Brockford came to be in the train, which left Haslemere at twenty minutes to three. He had telephoned to his City office that it was impossible for him to come to town to-day,

and some important business appointments had to be postponed in consequence. The train did not stop between Woking and Waterloo, the run taking, roughly, half an hour.

"No weapon has been found, nor has there yet been found any trace of the assailant. That robbery was not the motive of the crime is certain, for Mr. Brockford's watch, sovereign-purse, and other valuables were found untouched. The injured gentleman had extensive City interests. Chief Detective-Inspector Marsh, of New Scotland Yard, has charge of the investigation."

But the newspapers, despite their far-flung line of skirmishers, did not know everything. Marsh, a lean, grizzled man, had an hour's start, and he had eluded the hordes of journalists thrown promptly in search of him.

Winter, the urbane superintendent of the Central Criminal Investigation Department, had received them with his accustomed geniality.

"My dear boys," he protested, "you know as much as I do." His blue eyes met theirs squarely and frankly. "Marsh is on this business and he hasn't reported yet. I haven't the remotest notion where he is. You shall know as soon as I hear anything. Yes, I'll ring you up, but I don't anticipate we shall get very far to-night. Have a cigar."

His manner was that of a man who would have gone far to help them. He exuded good-fellowship. Very rarely did Winter rebuff any man

who sought him out—in particular, newspaper men. The official manner has its uses at times, but it also has disadvantages. A chief of detectives—any detective—cannot have too many friends, and the superintendent had proved that he could achieve them without betrayal of his department.

Not that the reporters were deceived. They shot shrewd questions at him which he parried and twisted with imperturbable good-humour. He always had time to tell a funny story. No man was more accessible to callers or had more apparent leisure to chat with them. Yet the high administrators at Scotland Yard knew that, somehow, Winter contrived to do the work of two or three men—and to do it well.

The newspaper men withdrew at last, baffled and with a sense of amused irritation at their failure to draw the superintendent. Winter poked his head outside the door, and confided to his clerk in the little room on the other side of the green-painted corridor that he would be out indefinitely. Then he returned to his desk, adjusted his pince-nez, and redirected his attention to a medley of letters on a telegraph form. It was a cipher message, the decoding of which would have interested the journalists. Presently the superintendent finished his task, and scrutinised the result with puckered brows.

"Brockford not seen leave Oakden Park. Last seen before confidential interview here with John Strang, the airman to whom his

step-daughter engaged. Apparently quarrelled. Strang not seen since. Has flat in Ashley Gardens, Westminster. Suggest detain. Returning.—MARSH."

The wire was dated from Haslemere.

"Good man, Marsh," murmured Winter, and took down from a shelf of reference books a much-used copy of *Who's Who*. He turned to Strang's name, and lifted the telephone receiver behind his desk. "Hallo! Get me on to Canterbury Row—yes, the C.I. Department. Is that Canterbury Row, C.I.? . . . That you, Bendall? Slip round to Ashley Gardens, will you. Strang—John Strang, the airman, has a flat there. . . . Ask him to step back with you to the station, and hold him till Mr. Marsh comes. . . . Yes, it's this railway murder. Good-bye."

The advantage the professional detective has over the amateur lies largely in organisation. At almost any point in London, Winter was able to lay his hands on competent and trained men—by the hundred if necessary. Twice more he rang up, and each time a divisional detective-inspector was dispatched from some police-station in search of Strang—one to the Aero Club, another to the Wanderers. Then the general machinery was set to work, and private tape-machines in a couple of hundred police-stations tapped out a description of John Strang, with instructions that wherever he was seen he was to be detained, and report promptly made to headquarters.

The business of looking for a man in London is really very simple if your organisation is big enough. Winter had scarce completed his arrangements and leaned back with a little sigh of satisfaction when the telephone buzzed. He recognised the voice of Lever, of the Special Branch.

"Hallo, Winter. I say, old chap, have you got a second to spare? There's a matter cropped up——"

There is a little advertised section of detectives at Scotland Yard whose work is rarely done in the limelight. The Special Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department assiduously avoids publicity. In times of peace there is always the dread that its motives or its actions may be misconstrued. In war-time its operations are conducted with even more baffling secrecy. It stands between the borders of the shadowy organisation of the Secret Service and the Central Criminal Investigation Department.

Its work lies not with murderers and thieves, but with the thousand and one intricacies of political crime. Its men are police-officers, yet they rarely effect an arrest—as an arrest is understood by the ordinary man. It has its agents in a hundred cities. It is not a political police, but it is as near an approach as England has.

While peace held sway in England it concerned itself with the guarding of great persons, with the watching of anarchists, and baffling the ingenious activities of the suffragettes. The

opening of the war had thrown upon it a strain to which it had quickly adapted itself. There were German agents who had had cause to regret their underestimation of its abilities. Probably its staff would not have made good spies, but for tracking spies they were of eminent service.

Lever, its superintendent, like the majority of his men, was Irish; for the Special Branch dates from the birth of Fenianism, and a tradition has come down that none but Irishmen should enlist in its ranks.

A tall man with a pointed grey beard, in which traces of auburn still lingered, he had seen detective service in every country in Europe. His discretion was proverbial. They said at the Yard that his souvenirs from royalties—sleeve-links and tie-pins—would, if extended in a straight line, reach the whole length of one of the great corridors.

Winter tapped at his door and flung it open. Lever was seated at the desk by the tall window. Grouped about the room were three other men, whose eyes turned to the newcomer as he entered. One at least he knew—the short, thick-set man with the bronzed face and the close-clipped brown moustache. It was Larkett, of the Secret Service.

Lever rose. "This is Mr. Winter, gentlemen. You know Captain Larkett. Mr. Marklerm, of the Admiralty. Mr. John Strang."

Winter did not often allow himself to be surprised; but a quick flicker of astonishment crossed his face as his colleague pronounced the

name of the man in search of whom he had just set the vast resources at his disposal to work. But the flash was instantaneous. The next moment he was quite imperturbably smiling. He nodded to the brown-faced man with the close-clipped moustache.

" How d'ye do, Captain Larkett ? Pleased to know you, Mr. Marklerm. Glad to meet you, Mr. Strang."

He shook hands all round, and sat down in a chair in a position from which he could study Strang's face.

" What's it all about, Lever ? " he asked.

CHAPTER IV

LEVER fingered his beard and glanced at Strang before replying. "It's a curious business altogether," he said. "The fact is, that the shooting of this man Brockford may or may not have something to do with another affair—something much more serious."

Strang nodded. "Mr. Lever thought it necessary for you to be here, Mr. Winter, because he thinks it possible I may be suspected of this railway outrage."

He spoke in a level, casual tone, as though such a suspicion were a matter of small moment. Yet the keen blue eyes of the detective perceived that the young man was striving with suppressed agitation.

"Really," he answered. "Of course, that's absurd."

Captain Larkett had been absently toying with his watch-chain. He broke in now.

"Of course it's absurd," he echoed. "Brockford won't be a great loss to anyone even if he does die. We've had an eye on him lately, and he's had a narrower shave than he knows of running up against the Defence of the Realm

Act. Somehow we've more than a notion that he's been concerned in a lot of our troubles, but we've wanted to get at the man behind. I suppose you've had some idea that Strang might be mixed up in this crime?"

"Well," said Winter deliberately, "I want to say that my mind didn't rest on the possibility for a second. Naturally, my people are concerned to follow every possible line of suspicion, and it seems that Mr. Strang was at Oakden Park this morning——"

"You dismiss all that from your mind!" said Larkett sharply. "I've known Jack Strang all my life, and I'd bet on my knowledge of him if nothing else. If you want to know the facts in a word, here they are. Strang here was engaged to Brockford's stepdaughter. Brockford swindled Strang by a side-line, and Strang—who is as innocent as a baby in financial matters—went down to have it out with him this morning. There was a bit of fuss, which ended by Brockford offering an amend—that is, he was willing to pay £50,000 for the plans of a new waterplane which Mr. Strang has nearly perfected."

Winter whistled softly through his teeth. "A German agent?" he muttered.

"Precisely. Of course, there was a row. Strang, like the rest of us, thought the secret had been kept, and it upset him to find that Brockford knew——"

"The man who shot Brockford did a public service. I suppose that is what you are

driving at?" observed the superintendent significantly.

Strang flushed and leaned forward, his face grim. "Understand me, Mr. Winter, I never have raised a finger against that man. We'd better be clear on that."

"I am sorry," murmured Winter. "I am of course quite satisfied on the point."

"Strang came back to town," went on Larkett, "and went straight to the Admiralty. That's how I came to be in this. Mr. Marklerm was told to send for me, and the three of us left for Strang's flat. He opened the safe where he left the plans in our presence. They were gone. I put one or two ends in motion, and then we came here to see Lever."

"I see," said Winter slowly. "It looks bad."

"Bad?" echoed Marklerm, speaking for the first time. "If those plans ever get into the possession of the enemy it will be worse than a big defeat. It will utterly overthrow every scheme for our pre-eminence in the air."

Larkett nodded gravely in corroboration. "We've got to get 'em back somehow," he said.

Lever had been writing. He looked up now. "Marsh is on this shooting business, isn't he?" he asked. "I'd better let you have Mulvaney to work with him. It's something more than attempted murder this. You'll have to call off any of your people who are camping on Mr. Strang's trail."

"I'll see to it," agreed Winter.

"We'll all have to play this hand out together, I suppose," he said. "Unless we do something the Cabinet will want to hang somebody," he added, with a rueful smile.

Winter had been pursuing his own line of thought. "No sign of the safe having been tampered with, I suppose?" he asked.

Strang shook his head. "No; it must have been opened with a key. Yet it is one of the best makes, and the key is never out of my possession."

"H'm," commented the other. "I think we'll go to your flat and have a look. We'll have a taxi."

"There's my car outside," said Larkett.

"Just the thing. If you people go on I won't be a minute."

He left them and hastened to the chief inspector's room. "Grey," he said, "I'll be out for a time. You take charge. Cancel all instructions on the railway mystery. If Marsh comes in, tell him to do nothing till he sees me."

He hurried down the narrow flight of stairs that leads to one of Scotland Yard's little back doors and stepped into the car. In seven minutes they were at Strang's flat.

As they descended, a man stepped quickly towards them and gave back on seeing Winter and Lever.

The former nodded. "It's all right, Bendall. All instructions cancelled; you can go home."

Strang led his companions into the lift. His flat was on the second floor. They passed along a thickly carpeted corridor to a small room furnished as a study that overlooked the street. In a recess a green silk curtain hung. The airman drew it back, disclosing a small safe built into the wall.

"This is the safe, gentlemen," he said.

"Lend me the key," said Lever.

He stooped and flung back the heavy doors, the others peering over his shoulders. A bunch of papers lay on the upper shelf. Lever pulled them out and handed them to Strang, who turned them over feverishly.

"My God! They are the plans. They have come back!" he exclaimed.

Silence held the little group for a second. Each had grasped the significance of the return of the plans. Strang faced the others, the papers in his hand, bewilderment in his face. Of the rest, Marklerm alone showed signs of perturbation. Neither Larkett nor the detective gave any indication that the discovery had moved them in any way. The Secret Service man voiced their thoughts.

"Copies have been taken," he said, with a little jerk of the head.

Marklerm's face was twitching. A superior's illness had brought him into the business. Never before in the ordered official routine of his life had he been confronted with an emergency of this nature, and his high-strung nerves were

giving way under the tension. He was almost hysterical.

"You will be held responsible, Captain Larkett," he exclaimed, his voice high-pitched with excitement. "If those copies get out of England——"

Larkett lifted his shoulders and smiled easily.

"That's all right, Mr. Marklerm," he answered. "The blame will be on my shoulders. But we are keeping you. If you would care for a lift back, please use my car."

He said nothing of the steps already taken by the highly efficient organisation that he served to deal with the situation. Already the Special Branch and his own unobtrusive agents were at work wherever there was a possibility of fruitful investigation. All the devices which make the way of the spy in wartime hard had been tightened. In certain foreign towns men and women had received detailed instructions in cipher, and quiet underground courses were being pursued in London. But Larkett rarely talked about his methods. Even Cabinet Ministers had on occasion had too intimate a question parried with a smiling: "I think you had better not ask that, sir." The Secret Service fought intrigue with intrigue, and many of its ways could not be endorsed by law.

The Admiralty official accepted his dismissal with relief. With a curt farewell he went from the room. Larkett calmly lighted a cigarette, and his hand fell caressingly on Strang's shoulder.

" Jack, old boy, this is not your lucky day. Pull yourself together. We'll straighten things out. They're a bit clearer already."

The other crossed to a big easy-chair and dropped into it. His face was bleak and tired. " Thanks, Larkett," he said. " There's some brandy and soda on that sideboard over there. Do you mind officiating, Mr. Winter ? "

He drank the strong mixture the detective handed him at a gulp, and the heavy dullness that the events of the day had brought passed. He put down the empty glass.

" It seems hopeless to me," he said. " Someone has got copies—and there are seven million people in London. Those copies have to be recovered immediately. No, I don't see how you can do it."

" We can try, anyway," said Larkett cheerfully. " Winter, how many people are there capable of dealing with that safe ? "

" Perhaps seven," answered the superintendent promptly, a gleam of understanding in his face. " I see what you are driving at, Captain Larkett. Let me have those plans a moment, Mr. Strang. I won't hurt them." He opened the papers on the table by the window. " You haven't any graphite, Mr. Strang, by any chance—or charcoal ? That's a pity. Never mind." His eyes roved round the room, and then, moving to the fireplace, he picked up the shovel and raked up the chimney. He was rewarded by a handful of soot, which he carefully sprinkled on the plans.

From one after another he blew the soot away. " There ! " he said, with satisfaction.

It was as though he had developed a photograph film. On three of the prints finger-prints stood out clean against the surface, some of them blurred, four or five of them plain and distinct.

" You don't mind my using your telephone ? " he asked, but the receiver was already to his ear. In two minutes he was giving brisk instructions. " . . . Tell Curtice to bring me copies of the prints here. I shall want a photographer. All right."

" How long ? " asked Larkett.

" Half an hour at most," replied Winter.

Strang had surveyed the proceedings with some astonishment. He recognised that these men were handling the affair competently on some well-defined line, but exactly what they were doing was a mystery to him. No one volunteered an explanation, and he asked no questions.

" Did you see anyone else at Brockford's place besides Brockford himself ? " asked Lever aimlessly, as though speaking merely for the sake of conversation.

" Only Miss Carstairs—and, yes, there was a man named Shaugnessy. He was talking to Brockford when I arrived. He said he had a business proposal to make to me later, but I did not see him again."

Larkett had been looking out of the window.

He glanced up now with sudden interest. "Shaugnessy," he repeated. "A fat chap with beady eyes?"

"That's the man."

"I see," commented Larkett listlessly.

The interest had gone out of his voice, and he did not pursue the subject. But the alert brain behind the indifferent face was fiercely picking to pieces a new aspect of the problem, for Shaugnessy was not unknown to him. It was obvious that Shaugnessy's visit to Oakden Park was associated with Brockford's effort to bribe Strang. But was he mixed up in the theft of the plans which had taken place during Strang's absence? Larkett decided mentally that the Irishman would be worth special attention.

CHAPTER V

THE little silver clock on the mantelpiece had ticked away twenty minutes ere Curtice, a big, black-moustached giant who had charge of the finger-print department at Scotland Yard, arrived.

He brought with him a small dispatch case, from which he produced three printed forms, which he handed to Winter. On spaces in the centre finger-prints had been impressed.

"The other men you mentioned are accounted for, sir," he said. "There are only three who could have done a job in London this past week."

"See if you can make anything of these," said Winter. He passed back the forms, and with them Strang's paper. Curtice bent over them, his eye scanning each closely. The superintendent looking over his shoulder gave a little exclamation of delight.

"Got it!" he cried. "I'd have bet Jimmy Maxwell was our man. He's the greatest living artist in safe-breaking. If his brains were as good as his fingers he'd be a living terror."

"Three prints correspond exactly, sir," said Curtice. "The papers have been handled by someone else."

" Yes, Mr. Strang here—and someone else. You've got the photographer downstairs, I suppose ? Let him come up and get pictures of all the prints."

" You know who copied the plans ! " exclaimed Strang. " Then this business will be cleared up now. You will be able to arrest this man Maxwell."

" Not exactly," said Larkett. " He's the man who opened your safe. We want to find now the man behind him—the man for whom he took the copies of the plans. As to arrest, it's a question whether it's altogether advisable. We shall have to see." He turned to Winter. " You'll deal with Maxwell, of course."

" It's ten o'clock now," said the superintendent, glancing at the clock. " With luck we'll get him before breakfast to-morrow morning."

" Right you are. Then I'll say good-night. I've one or two things to see to, and there is nothing more I can do here." He gripped Strang's hand. " Good-bye for the present, old chap. Don't let things get on your mind too much. We'll do our best to straighten this out, anyway."

When they had gone the grey look came back into Strang's face. He sat in the big armchair, his chin resting on his cupped hand, eyes gazing into vacancy. The day had seen all his castles in the air topple into ruins. The gloomiest forebodings racked his mind. He reflected bitterly on the ironical tricks which

fate had played with him. Yesterday he had complacently regarded himself as a benefactor to his country. And now the plans were no longer his secret. "As bad as a big defeat." That was what Marklerm had said, and he knew the truth of the phrase.

He told himself that he would be blamed. The country was at war, and no responsible man was entitled to plead bad luck. Of what avail to say that he had taken every reasonable precaution? He had no business with the plans in his private keeping. The Government would have adequately safeguarded them, but he had preferred to hold them himself. His prospects had been damned when that safe was opened. The money of which he had been cheated was a small thing in comparison. He felt, illogically perhaps, that his honour was involved. And the maddening part was that he must sit helpless and impotent while others worked to retrieve his mistake —if it was not already too late. And Betty—what had he left to offer her?

So the grey dawn found him. At seven he made an attempt to shake himself free from his depression—bath and breakfast were to some extent successful tonics. He opened the morning paper greedily. There was little need to search for what he was interested in. Two full columns in blazing headlines were devoted to the "Railway Outrage."

"Detective-Inspector Marsh," he read, "made a special journey to Oakden Park last evening,

and returned to London after obtaining statements from most of the inmates of the house. Inquiries made by our special correspondent show that the only visitor received by Mr. Brockford yesterday was Mr. John Strang, the well-known airman, . . ."

"Curse their prying impudence," muttered the reader.

". . . who left after a short interview. A Mr. Shaugnessy, a friend of Mr. Brockford's, who was staying here, left for London immediately on receipt of the news of the outrage. Miss Carstairs, Mr. Brockford's stepdaughter, also left for London. It is understood that an arrest is probable to-day."

A discreet tap at the door interrupted his perusal, and his man entered. Strang lifted the card he brought. "Mr. Patrick Shaugnessy," he read.

The card fluttered from Strang's fingers. He recalled Larkett's question indicating that he knew the Irishman. But perhaps he had called about the accident to Brockford.

"Show him in," he said.

If there was anything strange about Shaugnessy's visit his manner did not show that he was aware of it. He waddled in, hat in hand, his restless eyes roving about the apartment. The young man took his flabby hand cautiously and almost immediately withdrew his own.

"How are you, old chap?" exclaimed the Irishman. "A sad thing this about our poor

friend Brockford, isn't it? And to think that we never dreamed of this yesterday. Well, well."

He sat down, his umbrella between his knees, his hand resting on the handle.

"You have seen him, then?" asked Strang.

"No. Unfortunately he is not in a condition to see anyone. Even Miss Carstairs, I understand, has only had five minutes with him since the accident."

Strang shrugged his shoulders and stood up. "You'll forgive me," he said icily. "To-day is an exceptionally busy one for me. If you can tell me the object of this call I can give you"—he took out his watch—"exactly five minutes."

"That's the spirit," said Shaugnessy cheerfully. "I like a man who comes plumb down to business. I'm a blunt business man myself, Mr. Strang, and I'll come down to the point right away. When you saw Mr. Brockford yesterday he made you an offer?"

Strang was rigidly on guard. His heart thumped a bit faster, but his face was impassive as the question revealed Shaugnessy. Up to that moment he scarcely considered the Irishman at all as concerned in the previous day's events. His first impulse was to secure the man and telephone to Larkett. Cooler reflection brought the remembrance of the Secret Service man's warnings. Hasty action could do little good and might do harm. He realised that any tampering with Shaugnessy would result in conveying an

alarm to the man's confederates if he had any. And, after all, this visit seemed to show that the other could have had no connection with the visit to the safe.

"Did he?" he answered indifferently.

"He did," repeated Shaugnessy. "And now I've come to learn what your answer was."

The younger man leaned across the table. His eyes were shining ominously. "So you know about that, do you?" he said. "If it is not an impertinence to ask, how do you?"

The other met his gaze steadily. "Simply enough," he said softly. "It was on my behalf that he was acting."

"Ah!" Something in Strang's abrupt ejaculation caused a new light to come into Shaugnessy's beady eyes. "You are a German agent—naturally."

"I'm just nothing at all," smiled the Irishman. "Put it that way. Only tell me what you propose to do."

Strang came round the table and towered over him. "I'll tell you what I propose to do," he said, and his hand took a grip of the other's collar. "I propose that you get out of this place in a matter of seconds—while I am still able to resist the temptation to drop you down the lift shaft."

Shaugnessy shifted his umbrella, fixed his thumbs in his watch-chain, and crossed his legs.

"You're impulsive, Mr. Strang," he said smoothly. "I should say that was one of the

great defects of your temperament. If you thought of the matter calmly you would consider that I don't put my head in a tiger's jaws unless I feel sure they can't close. Do you know that within five minutes of the time I leave this flat you will be arrested? "

The hand of the younger man contracted on Shaugnessy's collar. Then his sense of humour overcame his anger. He laughed and released his hold.

" I begin to think you're a humorist, Shaugnessy," he smiled. " Before I have the privilege of smashing your fat carcase I'd really like to know what the joke is? "

The sudden change of front a little disconcerted the other. He had not expected this attitude. An uncertain grin spread over his face. He slapped his leg with his open palm.

" You'll do, Strang," he cried. " 'Pon my soul, I like to deal with a man. A little thing like arrest for attempted murder—it may be murder if Brockford dies—doesn't worry you any."

Strang walked back to his seat. His passion had evaporated. He was amused rather than annoyed. His insight told him that whatever Shaugnessy's game was it would only be penetrated by maintaining his equanimity. " So I shot Brockford, did I? " he said meditatively. " No, as you say, a little thing like arrest for that doesn't worry me."

Shaugnessy shut his mouth tight. " Of course

you did," he said, as one laying down an indisputable fact. "Isn't it myself that could tell a story if I wanted to? Your quarrel about Cinch Tight, for instance. Brockford was last seen with you. Neither of you was seen to leave the house—except by me. I have a witness who saw you board a train together at Haslemere, and another witness who saw you leave the train alone at Waterloo. You had a pistol that took a ·32 cartridge, I believe." He placed his hand in his overcoat pocket and tossed something with a clang on the table. "There it is. Brockford was shot by a ·32 bullet."

"Mostly lies, of course, Shaugnessy," said Strang suavely. "You picked that weapon up at Oakden Park when I dropped it before I saw Brockford. Do you really think I can be bluffed that way, I wonder? It would be interesting to know what the police would think of your story. There's the telephone here. Would you care to ring 'em up?"

"Oh, you're a cool hand, my lad. I'll not deny it. You think you have only to say that I'm a German spy." He brought his fist down fiercely on the table in the first flash of excitement he had betrayed during the interview. "Why, you poor fool, it's your word against mine. I'm a well-known man in business circles and there isn't a shred of proof against me. Now listen." He became persuasive again. "I repeat the offer that Brockford made you. You may imagine what Scotland Yard will do if I

put the evidence I hold against you before them. There is one other condition."

"I shall be delighted to hear it."

"You will write a letter to Betty Carstairs telling her that you renounce all claim to her."

A little start ran through Strang. If the other's object had been surprise he had succeeded. But the airman held himself in.

"I will tell you what I am going to do now, Mr. Shaugnessy," he said. "I am going to ring up Scotland Yard and tell them that I hold a spy here at their disposal. I fancy that before I find myself in the dock you may play principal part in a more melodramatic ceremony with the help of a firing squad. You may tell your cock-and-bull story and be damned."

He moved across the room to the telephone. Shaugnessy rose and gripped the back of his chair. He half lifted it, and the airman realised his purpose too late. He sprang backwards. The chair descended with crushing force and Strang crumpled limply across a couch.

CHAPTER VI

SUPERINTENDENT WINTER, like Strang, had passed a restless night, but it was from different causes than had operated in the case of the airman. He was a man who believed in quick action. When he left Ashley Gardens he had walked to Scotland Yard, and thence had strolled towards Leicester Square.

The detective moved casually down the steps of one of the night cafés into the ornate supper-room—where, as a matter of fact, supper was rarely served. Men and women crowded the little tables, and now and again a woman's shrill laugh echoed above the soft strumming of the string band, the hum of conversation, and the tinkle of glasses. The women were well dressed —too well dressed most of them—but the men offered a variety of types. The eyes of the detective searched the room and rested at last on a little group of four seated in a recess caused by the angle of the stairs. He walked towards them and laid his hand on the shoulder of a man whose back was turned towards him.

The man turned a sallow face with deep-set black eyes to the newcomer and an expression of uneasiness passed over his countenance.

"Why, it's Mr. Winter!" he exclaimed, with an ill-attempted affectation of heartiness. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Winter. Won't you sit down?"

"No, thanks, Jimmy," he said. "I'd like to have a talk with you. Your friends will excuse you, I'm sure."

There was unexpected friendliness in the tone, but Jimmy's face went a shade paler. "I'll go and get my hat and coat," he said, rising.

"And I'll come with you if you don't mind," said the superintendent. With a friendly gesture he placed his arm through Jimmy's, and they walked together to the cloakroom. Not until they reached the open air did Jimmy speak again of what was uppermost in his thoughts.

"What's it for?" he asked, a trifle tremulously. Although a burglar of parts, Jimmy Maxwell's nerve was not always to be relied on. He had gone to pieces now.

"I don't know that it's for anything yet, Jimmy," said Winter reflectively. "There's a friend of mine wants to put a question or two to you. It all depends on your answers to them."

The remainder of the walk was for Maxwell a time of miserable foreboding. They passed up Whitehall and through Great Derby Street into Scotland Yard.

Presently he returned, accompanied by the alert, short figure of Larkett. The Secret Service man shot a quick glance at Maxwell, and smiled as he

took up his position, legs outstretched, in front of the fireplace.

"Now, Jimmy," began Winter briskly, "we'll get to business. This gentleman wants to know who put you up to that job in Ashley Gardens."

Maxwell's thin hands clenched doggedly on the arms of his chair. "What job?" he demanded blankly.

The genial look vanished from Winter's face and the friendly tone from his voice. "Just as you like," he said. "I should tell you, Jimmy, we've got finger-prints." He half lifted the receiver from the telephone. "Shall I put a call through, Jimmy?"

Maxwell was driven into a corner. "All right, guv'nor," he said sullenly. "You'll see fair, won't you? After all, I only borrowed them."

Larkett lit a cigarette. "So you only borrowed them," he remarked. "Who asked you to do it? Let's have the whole story, my man."

"Well, gentlemen," said Maxwell, "it was Yid Foster put me up to it. He introduced me to a gentleman who was looking for a good man to pull off a job. That was at a tea-shop a week ago. This man explained that he had made a bet with a friend that one of the new Defial safes couldn't be opened without violence. He asked me if I could do it, and I said I could, given three or four hours. With that, he gave me the address and a description of the place. To prove that I had opened the safe, I was

to take out all the papers that were there, take copies or tracings of them, and put the original ones back. He said he'd wire me when the coast was clear, and gave me fifty on account and fifty to come if the job was pulled off satisfactorily. Well, this morning I got the tip and went and pulled off the job. There were a lot more papers than I expected, and I didn't know who was about, so I thought it best to bring 'em away to copy. I went to take 'em back this afternoon, but there was someone in the flat. So I waited till he came out and then slipped 'em in."

"What was the name of the man who had the bet?" asked Larkett.

"I don't know, sir," replied Maxwell earnestly. "He said Wynn-Brown; but I don't suppose that's right."

Winter shook his head reprovingly, but it was Larkett who struck in: "You're keeping something back. You know the man's real name."

"Better let us have it, Jimmy," said Winter. His hand hovered over the telephone receiver.

Maxwell hesitated in painful uncertainty, and twisted his hat in his hands. The Secret Service man had an idea. He picked up an evening paper which lay on the superintendent's desk and pointed to a photograph.

"That's the man, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Yes," answered Jimmy unwillingly.

It was a photograph of Richard Brockford.

CHAPTER VII

JIMMY MAXWELL had once in his life stood in what the American police call the "sweat-box," and painful memories of that ordeal swept across his mind during the next three or four hours. Larkett and Winter, so to speak, took his recollections apart and examined them in pieces.

A swift rain of questions fell on his ears, mercilessly insistent questions which were ever succeeded by others. Jimmy did not always follow their purpose, but he had a dread that they were trying in some way to connect him with the shooting of Brockford. Sometimes he fenced, sometimes he lied, but always they worried him until they were able to add another fact to their store of knowledge.

At last he was wrung dry. He had copied the plans at his lodgings at Kennington—a matter of an hour's work with tracing paper—and then gone down to Woking, where it had been arranged that he should meet his employer and hand them to him. The meeting had taken place in the refreshment-room. The time was somewhere about half-past three.

While Winter escorted Maxwell to the room of the night inspector, there to leave him looked

after until such time as it was possible to decide what to do with him, Larkett was busy running over the points of the story. If Maxwell were speaking the truth, Brockford had been playing some deep game. Why had he offered to buy the plans off Strang if he had already arranged that they should be stolen? Why had the airman been trapped into a position where he might be tempted? The whole plot had been too elaborate for one to suppose the offer to Strang was merely a piece of bluff. And robbery had been planned so that but for chance no one would ever have known the secret had been obtained.

If Brockford had wished to have two strings to his bow, one would have supposed that it would have been a matter of elementary caution to wait, before sounding Strang, till he had known the result of the attempt on the safe. He shrugged his shoulders. All these speculations were beside the main point. Where were the plans? In what shape would the attempt to get them out of England come?

His meditations were interrupted by the return of the superintendent. He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Well?" he asked.

Winter laid down a paper. "That's the record of what was found on the injured man. There were no plans."

"You have a motive for the shooting now, anyway," said Larkett. "That links up our

investigations a bit more. Whoever shot Richard Brockford has got those copies."

"That's so," agreed Winter. "And that person in all likelihood knew Brockford was going to have 'em on him."

The moon was shining serene and clear over London when Larkett left Scotland Yard. He leaned for a while on the parapet of the Embankment, looking down into the dark, smiling waters, in which danced the fantastic reflection of the subdued lights which edged the river. Now and again a train shot over Westminster Bridge. Once some shambling derelict whined to him for coppers. He gave the man a shilling, and became absorbed in his thoughts. Presently he gave an abrupt little nod, as if approving some plan of action which he had thought out. He moved across the road back to Scotland Yard.

Winter was still in his room. He looked up over his pince-nez, a little surprised as the Secret Service man entered.

"Lend me a pen," said Larkett abruptly. He busied himself with a sheet of paper for a few minutes. Then he straightened himself up. "Listen to this:

"METROPOLITAN POLICE

"£1000 REWARD

"The above sum will be paid to any person (other than a member of the police forces of the United Kingdom) for information leading to

the arrest of the assailant of Richard Brockford in a railway carriage between Woking and Waterloo."

"H'm," commented Winter. "It's rather out of our form, but with a few alterations it will do. But you don't want an arrest?"

"Not necessarily, but I do want information."

"Right you are. It's too late for the morning papers, but I'll have it sent round to the evenings and get some posters out. As you say, it may lead to something."

"All right. I'm going round to Strang's place now. You will let me know if you hear anything."

Larkett sauntered out. But he did not go to Ashley Gardens first. He hailed a taxi-cab, and gave an address in an eminently respectable street in Brixton. It was rented in the name of a pensioned officer of the Special Branch, who was quite willing to live rent free on the easy condition of receiving letters and telegrams addressed to "Mr. John Smith."

When Larkett emerged he had a dozen decoded messages in his pocket, all of which had arrived since a previous visit he had paid to the house. His subordinates had maintained adequate vigilance. Half a dozen men and a couple of women had been quietly raked into the net that was spread about the country and their belongings subjected to the strictest search. Somehow, Larkett did not believe that the plans had left England yet. The persons who were concerned

would take no avoidable risks. They would think out everything with German thoroughness.

"Drive to Ashley Gardens," he said, as he stepped into the taxi-cab.

It was yet early when he arrived. Strang's servant, an old soldier, admitted him. "There was a gentleman in with the master, sir," he said. "I don't know if he's gone. I'll just take in your card, sir."

He returned on the run, his face the colour of white paper. "He's killed, sir," he cried. "He's been murdered."

For all his self-control, Larkett felt his heart pound against his ribs. Jack Strang had fagged for him at Eton, and if not intimates, they had maintained relationship all their lives.

"Where is he, man?" he cried, and, following the man's outstretched finger, he dashed along the corridor to the room in which Strang had received himself and the detectives the previous night.

The airman was lying face down on the hearth-rug, arms stretched above his head. Larkett was by his side in an instant and had him in his arms. He carried him bodily to one of the big arm-chairs, and was relieved to hear his deep, stertorous breathing.

"Shall I fetch a doctor, sir?" It was the servant in the doorway.

"Yes—no, wait a minute, Gould." Professional caution checked Larkett's first impulse. His experience—for he had seen fighting in many parts of the world—stood him in good stead. His

steady, dexterous fingers unfastened the unconscious man's collar, and then with touch as gentle as a woman's he examined the injury to the head.

"Not so bad as it might have been," he muttered. "He's only knocked out of time. Pour out a drink of that brandy, Gould, and then get me some water and a sponge."

He quickly finished his skilful ministrations, and with Gould's help placed Strang on the couch. Then for the first time his eyes took in in detail the disorder of the room.

A heavy chair lay on its side, and the telephone had fallen. The drawer of Strang's writing-table had apparently been hastily rummaged and papers were scattered indiscriminately on the floor. A magazine-pistol lay on the table. The green silk curtain that hid the safe had been torn as if it had been roughly and hurriedly drawn back.

"Shall I ring through for the police, sir?" asked Gould. Instinctively he turned to the little captain for instructions.

"I don't think that necessary yet," said Larkett. His respect for the capacity of men like Lever and Winter did not blind him to the fact that all the members of the police force were not necessarily equal in skill and tact. He looked meaningly at Gould. "I think your master will pull round a little. We will see then. You can hold your tongue, Gould?"

"Yes, sir."

Larkett fingered the pistol. He remembered now that Strang had showed it to him when he

bought it. Then his eyes wandered to the litter on the floor, and his attention was caught by a tiny oblong of pasteboard. He stooped and picked it up. "Mr. Patrick Shaugnessy," he read, and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

So Shaugnessy had been there. Larkett bit his lip and wondered whether any of the cogs in the machinery had slipped. For he had made arrangements to cover the movements of that ingenious gentleman as soon as his trail had been picked up. Had he managed to evade the two men detailed to find and never lose sight of him?

On the other hand, the Irishman was not usually so clumsy as this. The disordered room told too many tales. And why should he have attacked Strang?

CHAPTER VIII

THE young man on the couch stirred, opened his eyes, and sat up abruptly. His hand went to the back of his head and he gazed vacantly around.

"Better, old chap?" asked Larkett. "You had a nasty knock."

"I'm all right," said Strang. "He was infernally quick. He got me before I could hit him." Somehow he took Larkett's presence for granted.

"Shaugnessy?" queried Larkett.

"Yes. How long have you been here? Has he got away?"

"He's clear away right enough. I drifted in a few minutes ago. What happened?"

A little dizzily Strang told of the visit and its consequences. The little Secret Service man tapped with the heel of his brightly polished boot on the floor and his eyes grew abstracted.

"We're getting on, Jack," he commented. "I'm sorry you got bashed, but at least we're learning something. We were only able to suspect Shaugnessy before—now we know definitely that he's an agent of the Germans. It's clear, too, that whatever has happened to those copies he hasn't got them. Yet he must be pretty desperate

or he wouldn't have come into the open like this. It's his game not to make himself conspicuous. Come to reckon it up, we're something to the good over this after all. I'd almost rather anyone have those things than Shaugnessy. He's a scoundrel I'm beginning to have a certain respect for."

Strang stretched himself. "Can you guess what he'll do next? Haven't you power to have him arrested quietly under some of our war laws?"

"Heaps of power," admitted Larkett. "But I'm not too anxious to act hastily. While we've got our eye on him he may not do much harm. I might even contrive that certain information is made accessible to him." He scratched an eyelid. "Some time possibly I'll fake something that will be decidedly not useful to the Huns. And if he—as I judge—is helping to control the remnants of the German espionage organisation in this country he'll be more useful to us at large than in gaol."

"You think that you'll get at other spies through him?"

"Possibly. I don't underrate his intelligence. But why I'm chiefly tempted to leave him at liberty is this." He laid his left forefinger against the palm of his other hand. "He's as anxious to get those plans as we are, and it's not unlikely that he may come across them before we do. In that case, why, we'll kill two birds with one stone—we shall get Shaugnessy and retrieve your secret."

"Surely," said Strang, "he'll guess that he's being watched?"

"We must risk that. In that case he'll be impotent and there'll be no harm done. But unless I miscalculate him he won't sit still. He's a fighter is the Irishman. This very affair here shows us that he's all in. He can't be quite without facilities, too, if I'm any judge, and he won't give in till he's beaten. There's a personal side, too, so far as you're concerned. Look out for squalls. We'll have a couple of Special Branch men quartered with you here night and day if you don't mind." He saw protest on Strang's face and went on swiftly. "There are the plans, you know. If your safe can be burgled once it can be again."

Strang gave a weary assent as he rose and stretched himself. "You don't think I shot Brockford, do you?" he asked suddenly.

"Good heavens, no," said Larkett, startled for once out of his self-possession.

"Thanks. In your place I shouldn't be so sure. Shaugnessy had it all pat, and I judge he's the kind of man to get a dozen witnesses if he wanted them. What would Scotland Yard do in face of his story?"

"Laugh, I should think," said Larkett promptly. "Now supposing you had shot Brockford—don't get angry, old man—*if* you had killed him there's not a man in Scotland Yard who would lift a finger against you in the circumstances. It was a poor bluff and it shows how hard up he was for a means of persuasion. No, you can rely on it that if he brought the

Archangel Gabriel to testify against you you'd have nothing to fear on that count. All the same, it will be wisest to recognise that Shaugnessy's on the warpath. He wants the plans, he wants to get his own back on Brockford, who has apparently played what our Scotland Yard friends would call the 'double-cross' on him, and he wants . . ." He broke off abruptly.

"He wants . . .?" queried Strang.

"You won't mind my touching a delicate subject?"

"Go on."

"He's in love with Miss Carstairs. He'll find a way to put you out of the running, and there's only one way left to him now. Be careful you don't meet with an accident." He nodded significantly towards the pistol still lying on the table. "I should keep that in my pocket if I were you."

The other considered for a moment. He could remember now several things which bore out his friend's theory. He nodded. "Right you are, Larkett. I'll be careful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll see you later. I've got a call to make."

A very good idea of the person upon whom Strang had so suddenly decided to call was in Larkett's mind. He smiled as he took his leave, and dropped a hand for a moment on the other's shoulder.

"Don't you get worrying, old bird," he said, and passed out.

A quarter of an hour afterwards Strang himself left the house. As he turned his face towards Victoria Street a well-dressed man who had been aimlessly loitering at the corner sauntered after him. Captain Larkett was not a man to speak needlessly of every little precaution he had taken. It is highly unlikely that even had he been less preoccupied Strang would have noticed his unobtrusive shadower.

His destination was a house in Connaught Square—the house of Betty Carstairs' maternal aunt. He sent in his card and in a little while was ushered into a cool morning-room. The slim figure of Betty herself was outlined against the window. His heart smote him as he saw how white and worn the delicate face was and the black rims about the eyes. She made no move to meet him.

"Betty!" he cried. "Betty!" He strode quickly across the room and crushed her in his arms. The girl made no response to his passionate embrace. She lay passive and her face was as if carved in stone. His old dread assailed him and he opened his arms. She stepped back.

"Is this your answer, Betty?" he asked.

"After yesterday what could I say?" she demanded dully. Then her fictitious composure forsook her. All at once she dropped to the couch and buried her face in her slim hands. "Oh, Jack, Jack, how could you do it?" she sobbed.

Her meaning broke upon him like a blow.

Shaugnessy's cynical recital of facts against him recurred to him. But it was something of a shock to find that the girl could seriously suppose him to be guilty of the attempt on Brockford's life. His stronger masculine temperament was incapable of immediately understanding.

"You believe that I shot your father?" he asked, incredulity in his voice.

She looked up at him, hope gleaming momentarily in her tear-stained face. His astonishment was too plain to be feigned. But despondency crept over her again. She made a weary gesture with her hand.

"They say—I know—you quarrelled with him. You did not come back to me—for—your answer. And there are witnesses who saw you in the train with him. You . . ."

A vivid light came to him. She was using almost Shaugnessy's own words. He remembered what Larkett had said. Here was a probable move of the Irishman to break her faith. He interrupted quickly.

"Wait a minute, Betty. Shaugnessy's been here—this morning?"

"Yes," she admitted wonderingly.

The man sat down by her and his arm caught her waist. He even smiled. "Little girl," he said, "you have been listening to a liar. I have no reason to like Mr. Brockford, and we did quarrel. But, as God is my judge, I never laid a finger on him."

There could be no doubting his sincerity. Her

hand sought his and he felt a tiny pressure of the fingers. "But—but," she questioned, "why should Mr. Shaugnessy . . . ?"

Two lines bit deep into his forehead. He was racked by fierce thought. To tell her all was impossible. Even if she would believe anything against her stepfather, he could not tell her. He straightened up a little.

"Listen to me, dear girl. Shaugnessy is a scoundrel—a scoundrel such as in your innocence you have never dreamt of. I can't tell you all—there are reasons why you must not ask me. I have learned much about him during the last few hours, and this at least I can tell you: he is a German spy. That, I have the best of reasons for knowing. He came to me this morning and made a vile proposal—that I should assist to betray the country. There was a little trouble and he left me unconscious. That must have been just before he came to slander me to you."

She was all solicitude in a moment. She sprang to her feet. "You are hurt, Jack? And I am accusing you of all sorts of horrible things. What a selfish little beast I am. You poor, poor boy."

He pulled her down to him again and his lips met hers. "Oh, it was only a little tap," he assured her. "I've not even a headache now. I don't suppose he knew how hard my skull is, or he would scarcely have tried to impose on you with his fairy story. All will come right now,

Betty dear; all shall come right." His strong jaw shut with a snap.

"Why should he have done this?" she asked, and her brows were contracted into a puzzled frown.

Strang hesitated. He had his periods of caution. The secret of the copied plans was not his own, and though he would have trusted Betty with his life, he could not tell her all that lay at the back of the spy's actions. But there was one thing he could tell her. His eyes met hers steadily, and there was a whimsical light in them.

"Can't you guess, Betty?" he asked. "You might see why in any good mirror."

A vivid wave of colour swept across her face. "That man," she said with a grimace.

"That man," agreed Strang. Then after a pause: "Poor chap."

Betty did not trouble to ask the reason of this unexpected sympathy with the Irishman. Her impulsive brain had moved her to a new train of thought.

"Jack," she said uncertainly, "there's father. Whatever he's done to you he has paid bitterly now." The tears gleamed afresh in her eyes. "He may not be so much to blame as you think. And he is all I have."

He stroked the smooth surface on the back of her hand tenderly.

"Don't you worry about that, little girl," he said. "I've forgotten all about that now that it makes no difference."

"It makes no difference, dear," she echoed.

CHAPTER IX

BEFORE the war, the exclusive club which Mr. Patrick Shaugnessy favoured had included in its membership both Germans and Austrians. Now, it was not to be supposed that any patriotic club would tolerate the presence of undesirable aliens while the nation was engaged upon a life-and-death struggle, and a strong official hint from the committee had resulted in the purging of the undesirable element.

Mr. Shaugnessy himself had been vehement amongst those who supported the committee in its action. It might not have been necessary, but all these little things help a man to achieve grace. If anyone after that had dared to suppose Mr. Shaugnessy one of the most alert, most highly regarded spies in the service of the German Empire, he would have been very properly laughed at.

His clothes seemed even more slovenly than usual as he sat in the deserted library of the club and nibbled reflectively at the end of a pen-holder. His amiable full moon of a face was as placid, as good-humoured as ever. Yet he was troubled. There had been bungling; there had been miscalculation. And he was a man

who liked neither of these things. All the effort of months, the lavish scheming, the elaborate expenditure of money had been wasted. He was still without the secret of the aeroplanes.

Looking coolly at the matter, he did not spare himself blame in that he had felt over-confident in the efficacy of his arrangements. The bait by which Strang was to have been taken he thought irresistible. He had not supposed that it would fail. The Irishman, clever as he was, had his limitations. With that cynical Prime Minister mentioned in history, he believed that every man had his price. That a man suddenly learning he was penniless should refuse a fortune for a simple reason of honour was a thing marvellous to him. He told himself that he had done wrong in confiding the final negotiations to Brockford. If he had handled them himself he would probably have pulled it off somehow. Yet Strang was a queer chap. Of course he was a fool in many matters, but he had seen through that desperate attempt at bluff.

Shaugnessy's mind wandered to one or two other points. He was a man who liked to see clear in front of him, yet he had to confess to himself that recent events had bewildered him. Chiefly he was worried about Brockford. It was not that he felt a trace of emotion for the confederate who lay between life and death. Shaugnessy did not care a snap of the fingers for any man's skin. What concerned him was the reason why Brockford had left Oakden Park

without so much as a hint of his purpose. And if Strang had not shot him, who had? In the cross channels of intrigue and espionage there are always subtle undercurrents which the wise spy tries to know. The unknown factor is too often deadly.

He checked the flood of speculation which threatened to overwhelm his mind and brought himself back with a jerk. Side issues would have to wait. His former plans had been knocked to pieces, but he was far from acknowledging himself defeated. Another form of attack had already begun to mature in his mind. There might be more danger in delay than in quick action.

Shaugnessy, for all that he sat publicly and apparently at ease in his own club, was not unaware of his own danger. He did not despise the qualities of the British Intelligence services, but the time had come when he could not avoid risks. His very recklessness was in itself a safeguard. If he was being sought for, he was in the very last place they would look for him. Nevertheless, it behoved him to act quickly. He dipped his pen in the ink, discarded a headed sheet of club notepaper in favour of a plain sheet, and began to write:

"My dear Miss Carstairs,—Since leaving you this morning, certain facts have come into my possession concerning the attack on Mr. Brockford, which I think you should hear immediately.

Steps are to be taken, I understand, to bring about an arrest this evening. I have not yet made up my mind whether to put myself in touch with the authorities, and I should be glad of your opinion on the matter.

"Although, as an old friend of your father, I should be glad to see the author of so cowardly an act brought to justice, I am not entirely clear as to your views, which your very natural emotion prevented you expressing when I called upon you. I trust that you will regard me not only as your father's friend but as your friend, and I can appreciate that a very delicate situation might arise should the projected arrest take place. I refer, of course, to the motive for the crime, and to the intimate terms on which a certain person stood to you.

"There are reasons, which I cannot very well explain in writing, why I am not able to call upon you, but I shall be at Piccadilly Tube Station within half an hour from the time you receive this.—Yours sincerely, P. S."

He reread the letter, and waved it to and fro in the air to dry it, although a sheet of virgin blotting-paper lay directly in front of him. It was forethought in these little things that had served him immunity in the course of a chequered career.

"That ought to fetch her," he muttered, and touched a bell. A waiter appeared in the magically silent manner of those club functionaries.

" I'm expecting a wire, James," said Shaugnessy. " You might inquire if one has arrived."

The waiter vanished, returning in a few moments with a buff-coloured envelope in his hand. " Just came while I was asking about it," he said.

Shaugnessy tore it open. " All ready now. Number 12,789 L.O.," he read.

He rolled the telegram into a ball and crushed it into his pocket. Then he wrote the address to his letter and handed it to the waiter. " Send that round by district messenger at once, will you ? " he said.

He made his way into the cloakroom and put on his hat and coat. As he emerged into the broad hall he almost collided with a couple of men just entering the club. The shorter of the two nodded affably. " Ah, Mr. Shaugnessy, I was wondering if I should find you here. Have you got a minute or two to spare ? "

A firm hand was extended in friendly grip on the lapel of his coat, and he met the friendly, open gaze of Captain Larkett.

In that maelstrom under the surface of international politics—the intelligence bureaus of the nations—the usefulness of men and women departs in proportion as they are known to their opponents. Shaugnessy knew Captain Larkett for what he was, but up till that moment he had not supposed that Larkett knew him save as a fellow club member believed to be in a large way of business as an export agent. But his face did

not change. He tried, as it were absent-mindedly, to detach the hand from his coat.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "This afternoon —any other time. I'm fearfully busy just now, and I've got an appointment—an urgent appointment."

"That is a pity," remarked Larkett, and he still held Shaugnessy buttonholed. "Come, five minutes won't hurt you, Mr. Shaugnessy. I've brought a friend here whom I'm anxious for you to meet. Let me introduce Mr. Winter. You've probably heard of him."

Shaugnessy's brain was working with the lightning quickness of a man in imminent peril. Yet if this was the prelude to arrest, he knew he could do nothing to avert it. His attitude showed no sign of his fears.

"Well, five minutes then," conceded Shaugnessy grudgingly. "Glad to know you, Mr. Winter." His voice had lost its usual robust heartiness. "Where shall we go?"

Larkett led the way to a palm-shaded recess and put his hand on the bell. "This no-treating order's rather a nuisance," he observed. "Still, as you're a member you may buy yourself a drink if you care to. Would you like a coffee, Winter?"

"Nothing for me, thank you," said Shaugnessy. He was wondering what was going to happen.

"I don't care for anything just now," said Winter, with a shake of the head.

"As you like," agreed Larkett. "Business fairly good, I suppose?"

He had composed himself with crossed legs in his wicker chair, and was adjusting a cigarette to an amber mouthpiece. Shaugnessy was not to be outdone in nonchalance. He nursed his knee with his two fat hands.

"Fair. Naturally, the war has upset things pretty considerably," he answered. "I didn't know that you took any interest in the export trade."

"Oh, at times—at times," said Larkett. "I dabble a little in certain kinds of merchandise now and again."

"Ah!" said the Irishman, in polite interest. He put up one podgy hand as though to cover a yawn and glanced at his watch. But his eyes flickered back instantly to the Secret Service man's face.

"Aeroplanes, for instance," said Larkett artlessly.

"War material. That's right outside my line. In any case, Government restrictions would prevent one doing anything," said Shaugnessy seriously. His little ferret eyes had not left the other man's face.

"Still, even in war-time one can make a bit of profit out of forbidden things. You understand that, Mr. Shaugnessy. I wonder if we could do a deal?"

"Eh?" This time Shaugnessy's apathetic demeanour was gone. He was sitting bolt upright. "A deal? I don't think I quite understand."

The bronzed face of the little Secret Service man broke into a smile. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"I didn't imagine you were so dull, Mr. Shaugnessy," he said. "However, it doesn't matter. Let's change the subject. There's been a curious development in the case of your friend Mr. Brockford. I don't know if you've heard. Strang, who was the last person known to have talked with Mr. Brockford, was knocked on the head this morning. You have a professional interest in that, haven't you, Winter?"

"To some extent," confessed the superintendent. In his blue eyes there dwelt mild amusement. He was professionally interested in Larkett's methods.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Shaugnessy, with concern. "I was introduced to him at Oakden Park. I hope it is nothing serious?"

"Not so very bad," said Larkett. "He's around again now." He took a little crocodile-skin card-case from his waistcoat pocket, detached a card and held it up to Shaugnessy. "That's yours, isn't it?"

Shaugnessy gave an affirmative nod. "I think I will order that drink after all, if you don't mind," he said. "Yes, liqueur brandy. Well, that is my card. I may possibly have given it to Strang when I met him at Oakden. What about it?"

The Secret Service man waved his hand towards Winter. "I want to keep this little

conversation on a friendly basis," he said. "I hate talking shop. Besides, Winter and I might quarrel. He is looking for a man who has been guilty of—what's the technical term?"

"Burglary with violence," said the superintendent.

"Oh yes. Thank you. Burglary with violence. I, on the other hand, am engaged on a more hazy quest—looking for a German agent, you know. I think my claim would take precedence of Winter's if it were found, awkwardly enough, that we were both seeking the same man. You see the penalty's higher."

Shaugnessy stretched out his hand towards his hat.

"That is clear enough, my dear Larkett," he said familiarly. "Avoiding your pleasantly indirect methods, you are telling me that I can go to penal servitude as a burglar or be shot as a spy—perhaps both. You don't expect me to admit that I'm either, I suppose. Since we are on the subject, though, I should be glad to know the alternative."

The Irishman took the frail liqueur glass that had been placed in front of him. "Here's luck, Captain Larkett," he said. "To our better acquaintance, Mr. Winter."

He drained the glass. The question had hit him hard, but not in the way that Larkett intended. Had someone forestalled him? Were the plans already in someone else's possession? Did the Secret Service man think he had them?

"Has our young friend Strang lost anything of the kind?" he asked easily.

"You haven't answered my question," persisted Larkett.

"No, I suppose I haven't. A man of your penetration might have guessed why. Why not drop this foolishness, Captain Larkett? If you want me to formally deny that I'm a German spy, I'll do so. But suppose I was, and suppose I had the plans that you've been talking about, do you think I'd be here now? I'm not unknown as a patriotic Britisher. You say I'm a spy. Prove it."

"Your own confession, for one thing," interpolated Winter. "You told Strang."

"I fear our friend Winter will have to ask you to accompany him," said Larkett.

"I think not." The spy was smiling now. "It would, for one thing, be exceedingly awkward for Mr. John Strang to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth in open court. And don't you see"—he was standing now, and emphasised his remarks with a dumpy forefinger—"I should be forced to explain that I acted in self-defence; that he flung himself upon me when I taxed him with the shooting of Brockford." He wagged his head. "The evidence can be made fairly strong against him, and I think public opinion might even prevail against Government influence. Good-day, Captain Larkett. Good-day, Mr. Winter."

Neither of the two men made any attempt

to stop him. He swaggered away, humming a soft tune to himself, and glancing at his watch. Larkett met Winter's eyes and laughed ruefully.

"That's trumped our trick," he said. "I wonder what he's up to now? He's got some game on."

"I believe you," agreed the superintendent.

CHAPTER X

BETTY had buried her face in a bowl of white roses, and was drowning her senses in their delicious fragrance. They had newly arrived, and the card attached to them bore the name of John Strang.

To her the world had changed colour during the last few hours. A telephone message from the hospital had told her that although her stepfather remained unconscious there was now a possibility of his recovery. And all had been put right with Jack. There was nothing else that mattered. Jack was hers—hers.

Buoyantly she summoned her maid and began preparations for a visit to her father. She had scarcely finished when a note was brought to her. She studied the writing with a puzzled frown, striving after the manner of some women to identify the writer from the envelope. Then she lifted a small silver paper-knife from her dressing-table and slit it open. Her blue eyes opened wide as she read.

"MY DEAR MISS CARSTAIRS,—Since leaving you this morning, certain facts . . ."

She read it steadily through to the end, and

her pulse had quickened when she came to the signature. She had but a hazy notion of the processes of the law, and the suspicion of her lover that she herself had possessed made her the more abundantly receptive to Shaugnessy's intentions. The exposure of the Irishman which Strang had made made her distrust the writer but not his statements. He seemed so sure. They were going to arrest Strang—arrest him after all. Jack had reassured her, but what if he was—— What if, after all, the police did intend to make him answerable for the crime? Her breast heaved and her breath caught as she strove to see her way clearly. The letter which she held in her hand trembled like a leaf in a gale.

"Ring up Mr. Strang for me," she ordered the maid. "Don't stand staring at me." She stamped her foot impatiently. "Ring him up at once."

Amazed at the peremptory manner, entirely alien to her young mistress, the girl obeyed. Betty read through the letter again. If Shaugnessy were right or wrong, Jack must be told, she decided. He would tell her what to do. Jack had laughed at the idea of being suspected, but perhaps—a new thought occurred to her—he had been desirous of allaying her fears. How long that maid was! She would telephone herself.

She rushed down to the telephone. The girl was still talking to someone. Betty wrenched the receiver from her hand. "Is that you, Jack?" she asked.

"Mr. Strang is out," said the voice at the other end. "Can I give him any message?"

"This is Miss Carstairs speaking. Do you know where he is, or when he'll be back?"

"I'm sorry, miss, but I haven't the faintest idea."

"Very well. Ask him to ring up directly he comes back."

Her blue eyes were abstracted as she left the telephone and her lips tightly compressed. Should she ignore the letter, or should she go and see what the man had to say? For the moment she thought of asking her aunt to advise. But that would mean more explanations than she cared to give, even to the quiet, motherly woman who had offered her a haven at this juncture. No, since Strang was not available, she must decide for herself.

Even if there was no substance behind the Irishman's hints and threats, there could be no harm in her going. Her breath caught as she thought that Jack might have minimised his own peril from Shaugnessy's malice. The letter was so confident. He might have been anxious not to rouse her fears. She recalled that sometimes innocent people were arrested, and if any action of hers could save Jack the risk of that ignominy she would take it. It would be unpleasant to talk to Shaugnessy, naturally, but she would go. It could do no harm, if no good.

With quick, nervous fingers she pinned on her hat. "I shall be back to lunch," she told

her maid, and moved quickly down the stairs, through the hall, and into the quiet square.

She had reached Piccadilly Circus and walked twice through the corridor of the Underground Station to the Haymarket and back ere she caught sight of the Irishman. His face was hot and flushed as he hurried towards her, hat in hand.

"This is good of you, Miss Carstairs," he exclaimed. "I hope I have not kept you waiting? I was delayed."

She bowed coldly. She was hardly actress enough to conceal her repulsion. "I should be glad to know why you have brought me here," she said frigidly, ignoring his apology.

He spread out both his hands in a deprecatory gesture. "My dear lady," he exclaimed in his sleek voice, "my position is an awkward one. When I have told you all the circumstances you will understand. As your friend, if I may call myself so, I wished to spare you the humiliation of——" He stopped short. "This place is rather public, Miss Carstairs. I have a taxi-cab in waiting, and ten minutes' ride will enable me to put you quietly in full possession of the facts."

A glimmer of suspicion passed through her brain, but it was so absurd as to be instantly dismissed. It was broad daylight, in one of the most crowded spots in crowded London. Still, she hesitated.

"All this is very mysterious," she objected.

"It is necessary," he replied.

She walked with him to the pavement, where drawn up by the kerb, with its flag down, was a neat green taxi-cab. He held the door open for her, and gave some curt instructions to the driver which she did not catch. Then he took his seat beside her, and an expression of satisfaction flickered across his face, to disappear almost instantly. Her smouldering suspicions were alight once more.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

He adjusted his bulky form sideways so that he was partly facing her. "You are all right," he said reassuringly. "Now don't get alarmed."

In fact, Betty was alarmed. Instinct and reason both combined to focus dread of the oily, fat man in her heart.

"Stop the cab!" she cried. "You must put me down."

Rising, she struggled frantically with the window strap. Shaugnessy, ordinarily so equable, had his nerves taut, otherwise he would not have let an expletive slip as he pulled her roughly back. "Sit down, child!" he ordered brusquely. Then more softly, "You would have fallen out of the cab."

Indeed the cab was moving swiftly through a press of traffic. She had not noticed the direction they had taken from Piccadilly, but they were certainly in some main artery—Oxford Street, she believed. The man had shifted his seat to opposite her, and he seemed to her to be watching her warily with keen, menacing eyes.

An almost imperceptible shudder shook her as she tried to steady her brain. Such things did not happen, she told herself. She was overstrung; her fancy was playing tricks with her. But why, in that case, did Shaugnessy remain silent, grimly watchful of her every movement?

And at that moment he spoke. "We are just there," he said. "You will understand why I had to take precautions in a few minutes."

The words were reassuring, but her heart still fluttered wildly. The taxi-cab had run into a broad, almost deserted street, lined with tall houses of the red-brick and area epoch. It stopped in front of the pillared portico of one of these.

The door had opened even before they descended, and Betty saw a middle-aged woman, stylishly dressed, and with traces of a bold sort of beauty still remaining, holding it ajar. The girl cast an indecisive glance about her. A policeman was walking on the other side of the road, and a wild impulse to cry out to him possessed her. She smothered it immediately. She had carried the matter so far, she would see it through.

Shaugnessy's light touch was on her arm, and she walked abreast of him up the steps. She had a feeling that he had neglected something—but it was only later that she realised that the cabman had driven away without being paid. The woman at the door stood aside to let them enter. The Irishman shot a swift smile at her.

" This is Miss Carstairs, Madame," he said. " You will let her know what you have told me. Mme Levitska has means of knowing the purposes of Scotland Yard," he added to Betty in an explanatory undertone.

The woman made some polite commonplace and led the way up the narrow stairs into a room on the first floor, stiffly furnished as a sitting-room. Betty passed in front and wheeled about with one slim gloved hand lightly resting on the table. Shaugnessy had followed her in, and Mme Levitska had vanished. He closed the door, which apparently fastened with a spring lock.

" I owe you an apology, Betty," he said in a slow drawl.

She stared at him uncertainly, though comprehension was beginning to dawn on her. At the insolent familiarity in the use of her Christian name her heart had begun to flutter again with foreboding. She strove to keep a steady face.

" I don't quite understand," she said in a level voice. " What do you mean ? "

He had seized her gloved hand in his own ponderous paw and held it clasped tightly. " Betty," he said, " I want you to marry me."

CHAPTER XI

A WILD amazement thrilled through every nerve of Betty's being. She tore her hand sharply away, as though his touch contaminated her. An access of rage had driven fear from her mind. She stamped her foot furiously.

"Open that door!" she ordered. "Open that door at once!"

Shaugnessy advanced ponderously towards her, his arms wide open. To other eyes he would have presented a sufficiently ludicrous figure. But Betty saw nothing but menace in his heavy face. She shrank away as he approached. His arms dropped helplessly to his side and he stopped.

"Won't you listen to me, Betty? Don't judge too hastily."

It is probable that at that moment Patrick Shaugnessy had forgotten all that had hitherto dictated his actions. His subtlety had deserted him at the time it was most needed. He felt only that he wanted the girl, and his declaration had been impelled by a sudden gust of emotion that had swept all policy aside. In what he would have called a saner interval he would have laughed at himself in cynical self-mockery.

The main stake had been forgotten. All that now filled his mind was the slender girl who held away from him, her mobile face alight with contempt and scorn. It had to be a strong motive that provoked Patrick Shaugnessy to make himself a figure of ridicule. That alone was proof of his earnestness.

"Will you open that door?" she repeated tensely. "Or must I shout for help?"

Even as she spoke she noticed what she had not consciously observed before. The room, loftily pitched, was lighted by a cluster of electric bulbs dependent from the centre of the ceiling, and there was no window. She felt a sinking of the heart, but maintained a brave face.

"You would only exhaust yourself to no purpose," he replied. "Now don't be frightened, Betty."

"I am not," she lied with spirit.

The man, whose whole life had been spent in bypaths of intrigue and danger, and whose readiness of resource had rarely failed him, had met one of the few occasions on which he was entirely embarrassed. He had hitherto pursued a cynical attitude towards women in general; indeed he had often used them deftly enough to effect his purposes.

"Some men are fools with all women," he once said. "And there are other men who can be fooled by the right sort of woman; but it's a strong man who cannot be fooled by any woman."

And many a secret that would otherwise have

never been revealed had reached him through a woman. But those women had only been pawns in the game. He intended to use Betty, but he could not regard her simply as a pawn. It would have simplified matters if he could.

His passion subsided as quickly as it had arisen. He realised that he had made a fool of himself. After all, the girl was in his power. He could afford to wait. Naturally the girl was upset. Later on perhaps she might be more amenable. Meanwhile the big thing was all that mattered. He set his jaw.

"You will, I hope, consider yourself a guest for a few days," he went on. "I shall trouble you very little, and Madame will do all in her power to keep you from weariness."

"You are going to keep me here for days?" she repeated incredulously. "You must be mad. The police will be looking for me. You cannot keep me a prisoner."

"A guest," he corrected. "I give you my word no harm shall come to you. As for the police"—he lifted his shoulders contemptuously—"I should not rely on them. I hate to inconvenience you, Betty, and you will be wise to reconcile yourself."

"Miss Carstairs, please!" she flashed. Her fists clenched in impotent rage. "You will pay for this."

"Miss Carstairs, then," he said humbly. "I was a little carried away. If you wish anything, will you ring?"

His broad form lingered for a second in the doorway, then the lock clicked and the girl was alone.

She reeled a little faintly to a chair and her brain groped at random for some insight into the hideous imbroglio in which she was involved. That Shaugnessy had lured her to this place merely to make a proposal was inconceivable. Betty Carstairs had common sense as well as looks. He might be in love with her, but some deeper object had inspired him in his action. Of that she was sure.

Both her intuition and her thoughts led her to Strang. Not a word of the young airman had escaped the Irishman's lips, yet she was sure that in some manner he was being struck at through her. Yes, that was the only plausible explanation. Shaugnessy was a spy, and the Government were taking up some of Jack's inventions.

Here was the end of a thread which her wits could not entirely unravel. Jack had offered no explanation of Shaugnessy's attack upon him; yet it must all be mixed up in the affair. One thing was certain—if she would avert the blow that her intuition told her was about to fall she must regain her liberty.

She began a systematic tour of the room. The door was of heavy mahogany and had apparently been newly fitted with a strong Yale lock. A round of the walls offered no suggestion. A tentative idea that she might find something to

batter a panel from the door was immediately abandoned. Even if she had the strength, the noise would put escape out of the question.

That kind of force was out of the question. There remained other means. She pressed her fingers to the bell under the mantelpiece and heard footsteps on the stairs. Mme Levitska came gracefully into the room, closing the door behind her.

"You rang?" she asked. "Can I do anything for you?"

Her voice was soft and cultured, but Betty noted the hard, unwavering eyes set in the strong and not uncomely face and felt her hopes sink a trifle. But she had determined to hold herself in control whatever happened. She had her own part to play, and there was nothing to be gained by an outburst. Mme Levitska had remained standing. Betty adjusted a chair for her. "Please sit down," she said in her sweetest voice.

Mme Levitska obeyed. "Perhaps it would be as well, Miss Carstairs," she said, "if I warned you that I am not the only person in the house. I tell you because you are probably stronger than I, and I should deplore anything like a scene."

Betty laughed. "I have not yet reached that pitch of desperation. I think that it will not be very long before Mr. Shaugnessy is in a very less comfortable confinement than I am at present. I should be sorry to think that you——"

" Shall we talk of something else ? " said the other woman blandly. " Are you quite comfortable ? "

The girl bit her lip. " Quite, thank you. Will you tell me why I am left here ? "

" I am not in Mr. Shaugnessy's confidence to that extent."

" Nor where I am ? "

The woman shook her head. " Please don't think me boorish, Miss Carstairs. Questions like these should be put to Mr. Shaugnessy."

It was a dead wall. Betty saw the uselessness of kicking against it. But she had not yet exhausted her tactics. Tears glistened in her blue eyes, and she flung herself impulsively to her knees, her arms resting on the elder woman's lap. The oval face framed in its sunny hair looked in pathetic entreaty into the other's. It was not all acting now. Words came in a torrent. She appealed to their common womanhood, to her pity, her sympathy. Mme Levitska sat in stony quiet. Her face was set and inflexible. There was not the faintest trace of emotion to be seen in it.

" Don't you think this melodrama is rather wasted ? " she said presently, in her quiet voice.

Betty stopped short in the middle of a convincing sob and whipped to her feet. She felt a very human impulse to box the other woman's ears. She restrained it with an effort.

" You are being paid for this, of course," she said. " If you let me go, or send a message to my

friends, you will be paid double or treble, and you will avoid the risk you are running now."

"You cannot bribe me," said Mme Levitska, rising from her chair. "I advise you to accept circumstances as they are. I will send your lunch up shortly."

She swept from the chamber as placid, as unmoved as ever. Betty mechanically began to unfasten her hat, and the action seemed to her somehow to symbolise her defeat.

CHAPTER XII

In one of the high-pitched rooms of a department of State in Whitehall a Cabinet Minister strode furiously to and fro, ruffling his hair with his left hand—a habit which his colleagues and subordinates had come to recognise as betokening fierce agitation. He was one of the Big Men of the Government—a very big man indeed—and wise, lesser folk who understood the signs always remained under shelter until the storm had broken.

There were some wise men in the room with him. They remained respectfully silent until it should please the Big Man to make some remark.

Here were Sir Vivian Bradleigh, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, slim of figure, grey-moustached, with thoughtful hazel eyes; the gaunt, big Sir Mackham Kennedy, the Assistant Commissioner, who controlled the Criminal Investigation Department; and his two executive lieutenants, Winter and Lever. Captain Larkett was stroking his toothbrush moustache in the big window recess, and Strang was seated near him.

"Consummate folly, I call it," declared the Big Man, and his glance challenged contradiction. No one replied, and he wheeled on Strang. "You have brought us into this mess, sir, you

and your flimsy safe. Can you suggest a way out ? "

" We must get the copies back, sir," suggested Strang.

" Pah ! " The Big Man's tone was one of comprehensive disgust. " What do you think, Larkett ? "

Captain Larkett met his chief's query equably. " I think, sir, there is a chance," he answered. " Neither those colleagues of my section whom I have consulted nor I myself are yet inclined to despair. Every conceivable precaution is being taken."

" And while you are ' taking precautions ' the enemy may have got the plans," sneered the Big Man. " Mr. Strang ' took precautions,' and this is the result."

" I am almost convinced that those copies are still in this country," said Larkett. " Even if a German spy had got them it would not be an easy thing to get them away. But we have reason to doubt that they are in the hands of a professional spy. We don't know definitely yet, and of course we may be wrong."

The sneer still remained on the Big Man's face. " Really ! " he remarked. " Who do you think has got them ? "

" Someone who has an idea of their importance, but does not know how to dispose of them," answered Larkett. " Those documents are like extremely valuable jewels—they have an extremely limited market. There is a step I pro-

posed to take with the help of Sir Vivian Bradleigh. It is rather drastic, but——"

"Well?" said the Big Man.

"I think you had better not know it, sir. If there should be any hitch there may be questions in the House."

"You are going to do something illegal? No, don't fence with me. Understand, Captain Larkett, I totally forbid you to do anything not in accordance with the laws of this country. You needn't tell me what your project is. I totally forbid it."

A smile flickered on Bradleigh's face. He leaned over and whispered something to Kennedy, who nodded assent. They all understood very well what the Big Man meant. He was telling them plainly that should he be embarrassed by anything they might do they would be flung overboard. The risk would be theirs. Yet there was not one who was not willing to plunge his career on the hazard.

"I scarcely think it will be necessary to go outside the law, sir," said Larkett. "It may be necessary to enforce some measures rather stringently—that's all. We shall be careful."

"You'd better," said the Big Man grimly. He was beginning to cool down. The other men ventured now and again to strike into the conversation, but the discussion was not prolonged. In ten minutes the conference broke up.

In the corridor Larkett drew aside the Commissioner of Police. "I have given Lever all

particulars," he said. "You think it practicable?"

Sir Vivian smiled whimsically. He held, as he quite well knew, one of the most precarious and dangerous posts in the whole Civil Service. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police is never quite sure how or why a storm may break, but he is always quite certain that he will be blasted by the full fury of the public opinion, whether the fault be caused by the mistake of a politician or the tactlessness of a constable. He needs to be a strong man to support his rôle of whipping-boy. Bradleigh was not a man to shirk his duty, as he saw it.

"There'll very likely be trouble," he said mildly. "I can't see any other way out, though. You know who'll be the first man to have his official head decapitated if we happen to lay hold of anyone who happens to have a pull in the right place and raises a yelp." He shrugged his shoulders. "We won't worry about that. I have given both superintendents of the C.I.D. full permission to carry out the business in the most effective manner. They'll co-operate with you in every possible way."

"Thank you, Sir Vivian," said Larkett, and, dropping back, thrust his arm through that of Strang.

"Let's go somewhere and have lunch," he said. "That is the most important thing we have to consider at the moment."

The young airman screwed his head round to

survey the other as they emerged into Trafalgar Square. "What are you up to, Larkett?" he demanded. "Is it necessary to keep me in the dark as well as the Government?"

"I always believe," said Larkett, "that however much you may trust anyone, it is wise not to give away your ideas unless there is something to be gained by it. That is professional caution, my dear chap."

"Meaning you won't say anything?"

"Meaning that I never ought to say anything. But I'll break a wholesome rule in your case. You see, those copies would only be of service to the Central Powers. The first thing we have to consider is, that to reach the Central Powers they must pass through the hands of one of their agents. That is a reasonable—I do not say it is an infallible—supposition."

"You mean that the man who has got them will sell them to a spy?"

"If he can find one. We of the Intelligence flatter ourselves that that may be a work of rather considerable difficulty. Still, there may be one or two who have escaped all the measures we have taken. That is the real point we have been discussing. We don't believe there are any unaccounted-for subjects of enemy countries in England, but spies now are to be looked for among neutrals and our own countrymen. Even there we've dealt with every person known or strongly suspected of espionage. We've very likely made some mistakes—in war-time you

can't always be delicate. There remain those persons against whom there is only a vague intangible suspicion — very often persons of some local position who may be perfectly innocent and merely the victims of gossip. Hitherto we have only had them watched. Now we propose to rope in for twenty-four hours or so every man and woman against whom there is a vestige of suspicion under the Defence of the Realm Act. Although that makes it quite legal to hold on suspicion any person indefinitely without a charge or without a trial, it will be a very arbitrary business, and we all know that there will be bad blunders and hard cases. That was why the Big Man just now refused to endorse the scheme."

Strang came to a dead halt. "I'm hanged if I quite follow," he said. "Why are you going to do this?"

"Why?" echoed Larkett. "Chiefly to give us a little more time to dig into the business. We might be lucky enough if the plans have already been disposed of to light on them. If they are not already in the possession of a spy we prevent them passing."

As had happened to many another Englishman, war had shattered in Strang's mind many illusions based on Magna Charta. But he still had certain ideas of the basic principle of British liberty, and the matter-of-fact way in which Larkett spoke of wholesale arrests under a sort of *lettre-de-cachet* system took his breath away.

"There will be the deuce of a howl," he said. "And if it gets to Parliament——"

"Let's hope it won't," interrupted Larkett. "Anyway, we'll wait till somebody finds the opportunity to howl—and the right person to howl to. Then those of us who are responsible will have to take our medicine." He grinned cheerfully, and his right eye flickered for the fraction of a second. "That's what we're paid for, Jack, my lad. Don't you worry. The Government won't find it difficult to discover a victim to throw to the wolves if it becomes necessary."

Strang was acute enough to perceive that the flippancy with which Larkett made his explanation concealed a very real uneasiness. He realised now the lengths to which his friend was prepared to go in an emergency. The talk switched into more or less indifferent subjects.

A porter pushed back the revolving door of the Hotel Palatial and they passed into the luncheon-room. A woman seated at one of the small tables returned Larkett's bow, and her eyes shot a quiet message to his. Almost immediately she said something to her companion, a tall, military-looking man, who rose and picked his way through the room. With a murmured apology to Strang the Secret Service man moved toward her. They shook hands, exchanged a polite commonplace or two, and Larkett returned to his friend. In the palm of his hand he held a note written on the back of a visiting card.

"That's Lady Malchester, isn't it?" asked Strang, who had recognised one of the most famous and most paragraphed Society beauties. She was leaning back now, languorously fanning herself with a long glove. The man who had left her, apparently dispatched upon some errand, was returning.

"Yes," said Larkett curtly. Not even to Strang would he admit that the beautiful young widow was one of the most indispensable, most acute of the allies he had at his disposal. His instruments were numerous, and were to be found in all strata of society.

He picked up the menu card, and his eye slipped to the message concealed in his hand.

"Nothing yet. Am still on the look out," he read, and gave a sigh of relief. He had confidence in Lady Malchester's efficiency.

CHAPTER XIII

THE two men lingered idly over the courses and it was three o'clock before they separated—Strang back to his flat, Larkett to Scotland Yard. The Secret Service man found Superintendent Lever puffing fiercely at a big brier pipe, busy with an orderly array of documents ranged on the desk in front of him.

"Come in, Captain Larkett," he said.

"Busy?" queried the other.

"Oh, fairly. I've got a lot of little things to see to—routine matters that have got in arrears. Thought I'd seize the opportunity to finish them off. Winter's out. He's handling the other job."

"That's what brought me along. How's it getting on?"

Lever laid down his pipe. "It's a bit soon to expect results. We've not had many reports in yet. As far as I hear they've had a big bag in the provinces."

"London is the important place," said Larkett thoughtfully. "I've got a sort of hunch that those things are within a cab-ride somewhere. If we don't pull this off at a gallop now I shall begin to be afraid that we're done."

"Yes," agreed Lever, and stroked his beard. "Now what do you think about Shaugnessy, Captain Larkett? Is he to be brought in with the rest?"

The Secret Service man grunted inarticulately. His brow wrinkled and he crossed his hands on the top of his stick and rested his chin on them. Lever's inquiring gaze met his.

"That's the devil of it, of course," said Larkett as if to himself. "Whatever we do in his case may be wrong. He's the most dangerous man—the spy above all I'm most afraid of. He'll be pulling all sorts of wires to get those copies. It's quite a little problem, isn't it? Here's Shaugnessy seeking an unknown thief whom we'll call X, and X is seeking presumably for a German agent. If Shaugnessy finds X before we do we'll most likely get Shaugnessy and X *and* the plans. On the other hand, if we catch X first we get the plans and can still deal with Shaugnessy. On the whole, I think we'll give him a little more rope. It gives us a second string."

"I think you're right," said Lever.

"You've got your men in touch with him, of course?"

Lever was a trifle confused and showed it. He was proud of his department and hated to confess that it ever ran with other than well-oiled efficiency.

"Well," he said hesitatingly, "you know I've got some of my best men acting with the Intelligence at the front."

Larkett was staring at him with steely eyes. "What's that?" he said sharply. "You're not going to tell me that you've lost sight of him?"

"He's rather dropped out of sight since Winter and you saw him," he admitted reluctantly. "But we'll get in touch with him again within an hour or two," he added confidently.

"We had better," said Larkett grimly, and the superintendent knew that he had lost ground in the other's opinion. "Why, I'd rather anything had happened than that. If I'd known this—well, it's no use getting angry, I suppose." He rose. "I'll have to go and arrange something on my own. Let me know if your people get him."

Nodding abruptly he passed out.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Strang had made his way back to the flat. Larkett's coolness and confidence had reassured him. For the first time for many hours he had acquired a serenity that no qualms about the missing plans could dissipate. He had promised to take Betty to tea and his mind was full of her. He was whistling cheerfully as he let himself in with his key and made direct for his study.

There was a shuffle of feet and a man rose promptly from a chair in which he had been reclining, put down the newspaper in which he had been engrossed, and waited calmly for the newcomer to speak.

Strang closed the door quickly and stood with his back to it as his hand dropped to his pocket for the pistol Larkett had warned him to carry. He was ablaze with suspicion. The stranger, a well-dressed, clean-shaven young man, was quite at his ease, but his attitude was respectful.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" demanded Strang sharply.

"Mr. Lever's instructions, sir," said the man coolly. "My colleague is with your servant. We were ordered not to leave that safe unguarded for a moment while you were out."

"You're from the Special Branch?" said Strang, withdrawing his hand from his pocket. He recalled now that a guard had been arranged.

"Yes, sir," assented the man.

Strang scarcely knew whether to be angry or amused. It was very necessary, no doubt. But a couple of detectives camped indefinitely in one's private quarters was rather embarrassing. It would be a relief to get the plans placed elsewhere as soon as the one or two revisions still necessary were completed.

He sat down at his desk and touched the bell. Gould stole in soft-footed.

"Will you arrange a room for these men?" said Strang brusquely. "They will sleep here. See that they have everything they want."

"Very good, sir. Miss Carstairs rang up while you were out, sir. She asked if you would be good enough to telephone her directly you got back."

"All right, Gould." Strang bent to two or three letters on his desk and Gould vanished, the detective following directly. The young man had no thought that the telephone call was anything out of the ordinary. He would ring Betty up when he had glanced at his correspondence. He slit the envelopes with a paper-cutter and read the letters casually. Two of them were invitations, the third pulled him suddenly to a pitch of tension.

"MY DEAR STRANG,"—he read,—"I owe you an apology for my violence this morning, although I feel your hastiness was partly to blame. I apologise with the more willingness because I feel that you will reconsider your decision. I again repeat my offer. It may influence you if I tell you that I have persuaded Miss Betty Carstairs to become my guest for a while—I fear an unwilling guest—though she is, of course, treated with the greatest consideration.

"I must warn you that any attempt to ascertain her whereabouts or my own can only result in failure, and may force my hand in a way that would be equally unpleasant to all of us. The easiest and quickest way to settle this matter is obvious. A personal advertisement in *The Times*, addressed K., expressing your willingness to negotiate, should be your first step. Trusting you have recovered.—Yours sincerely, P. S."

Many a time in his career Strang had given

proof of an icy nerve in circumstances that would have shattered the control of any ordinary man. But now, as he finished reading the sheet of paper in his hand, it trembled like a leaf in a gale. He was dazed, and it was a full five minutes before he could collect himself.

Then he reached for the telephone. It seemed an interminable time before he was connected with Connaught Square, and he cursed the seeming deliberation with which the servant at the other end answered the telephone.

At last he spoke to Mrs. Romer, Betty's aunt. No, Betty was not in. She had gone out some time before lunch and had in fact been expected back long ago. She supposed that she must have gone to see her father.

Strang controlled his voice with difficulty as he thanked her and rang off. He had sense enough to refrain from alarming the girl's friends.

His head bowed down and rested on his arms on the desk, and for ten wild minutes he fought with the greatest temptation of his life. Shaugnessy had been largely right in his calculations. While he held Betty in his power he had a lever to force the young airman to his purposes that was almost irresistible. Strang would have cheerfully sacrificed his life to preserve her from any harm.

His fists clenched with impotent rage, he worried the situation out. She would be hidden somewhere—anywhere. There was the covert

threat, "If you force my hand." How could he make any move in the face of that? It might be bluff, but his heart thrilled fiercely as he realised that it might not.

It would be easy enough to supply another set of copies to Shaugnessy. Who would guess? He pulled out his key-ring, and with white, set face fumbled clumsily for the key of the safe. Better, a thousand times better, to give up his honour than that she should run the risk that threatened her.

He inserted the key and half turned the handle. Then sanity came back to him. What guarantee had he that Shaugnessy would keep to any bargain? It was unlikely, but there was the chance — the bare chance. His face quivered, and then suddenly he made his decision. He relocked the safe, and with the note crumpled in his hand rang for Gould. He gave a few quick instructions, and picking up his hat almost ran for the lift. Larkett, he remembered, had said he was going to Scotland Yard. If he hurried he might catch him.

A taxi was crawling along the street. The airman swung himself aboard without calling the driver to stop.

"Scotland Yard!" he cried through the window. "Drive like blazes."

The Secret Service man was emerging into Great Derby Street when the cab came to a standstill. A moment later Strang had gripped his arm and was talking fiercely. Larkett nodded

quietly and drew his friend back into the big building.

"You say that Shaugnessy has abducted Miss Carstairs?" he said quietly. "All right, old chap. Keep cool. We'll see about it."

Nevertheless something of his own calm had vanished under the influence of his friend's excitement. He pulled him along to the end room of the green-painted corridor and thrust open Lever's door without the formality of a knock. The superintendent, who was standing in front of a bookshelf with a volume of reference in his hand and a well-worn brier between his teeth, regarded them with mild astonishment. He replaced the book and took his pipe from his mouth.

Larkett let his fist drop with a heavy thump on the corner of the desk—the first time Lever had ever seen him give the remotest sign of his feeling by outward act. He flung the letter down in front of Lever, and the latter seated himself.

"Read that!" he exclaimed. "If Shaugnessy had not slipped out of sight that could not have happened."

Lever methodically smoothed out the letter and his brow contracted as he read. When he finished he shrugged his shoulders and handed it back to Larkett. His face was slightly flushed.

"It's very unfortunate," he said dryly.

Strang's pulse was throbbing furiously. He resented the nonchalance of the detective.

"Unfortunate?" he broke in fiercely. "Can't you do something? Don't you realise that——"

A hand fell soothingly on his arm. "Steady, Jack!" said Larkett quietly. His momentary anger at what he considered an oversight of the Special Branch had disappeared. "We know what it means to you. But we mustn't lose our heads." He gently forced the airman to a chair. "Now let's look the matter in the face. Where was this letter posted from?"

"I don't know," confessed Strang. He searched his pockets. "I must have thrown the envelope away."

"It doesn't matter much," said Larkett. "Shaugnessy is not likely to have posted it from the district he's hiding Miss Carstairs in."

Lever had his finger on the bell. "Is Edwards there?" he asked of the messenger who replied. "Send him in."

Edwards proved to be a well-dressed, stalwart young man of about twenty-four or five. Strang had a vague idea that he had seen him somewhere that day, but he could not place him. Lever's opening words gave him understanding.

"You have kept Mr. Strang in sight all day?" asked the superintendent.

"Yes, sir," answered Edwards; and the airman suddenly remembered that this man had seated himself at a table a few yards away while they were lunching at the Palatial. "Except while he was at the Admiralty and in his flat," qualified the young detective.

" You are sure that no one else has been shadowing him ? "

" Quite sure, sir."

" Thank you, Edwards. That will do."

The man withdrew. Larkett smiled in Strang's direction. " I'll bet a sovereign you never knew you were being shadowed," he said.

" Yes, I seem to be well guarded," commented Strang, with a touch of bitterness. " If only Be—Miss Carstairs had been as well looked after——"

" Oh, come, old chap," retorted Larkett. " We couldn't know that anything of this sort was going to happen." He leaned forward and tapped Strang on the knee. " Now listen to me, Jack. We—Winter and I—tried to bluff Shaugnessy this morning. He simply laughed at us. He's a hard case is Mr. Shaugnessy. Do you know what he said ? "

" No," said Strang. His face was set hard.

" He hinted that he could make things awkward for you. Said he : ' All right, I shall not deny that I saw Strang. I have evidence that he shot Richard Brockford. He wanted to prevent me speaking, and I struck him down in self-defence.' Don't interrupt. I want you to fully understand. He is quite capable of making an attempt to fulfil his threat if we push him hard. We have had very good reasons for allowing him to run loose hitherto, but this makes a difference. If we are to trace out Miss Carstairs, we shall probably have to arrest him now—when we find him. You know a trapped cat bites,"

The airman surveyed his friend with sombre eyes. "You've not changed your mind, have you?" he asked heavily. "You don't think I did that?"

"Good heavens, no! But I want you to look the thing in the face. Shaugnessy will have taken precautions. We might with luck capture him secretly and hold him, so that he could not communicate with anyone. No trial would be necessary. But supposing—and knowing the man we must suppose it—that he has arranged that if he disappears the evidence against you is to be made public. Remember that what with events as they really happened and the evidence he will have manufactured there will be at least a *primâ facie* case against you. For your own sake, you might have to be arrested. At the best, there would be a cloud of public suspicion around you. Are you prepared to run the risk?"

"What that comes to is that I shall most likely be charged with attempted murder if you get Betty?"

Larkett gave a little inclination of the head without speaking. Lever nodded in sympathy. They were hard men, but they understood something of what the young airman was undergoing at that moment.

To their surprise, he laughed. The square chin had set at a more resolute angle. "Shall we let it go at that?" he said derisively. "Get Betty back, and it won't matter a hang what happens to me. Go ahead."

CHAPTER XIV

When Scotland Yard wants a man it releases certain machinery and supplements its efforts by other devices, according to circumstances. The procedure is much the same whether the sought-after individual is a spy or a pickpocket.

Lever had drawn a foolscap sheet of paper with the royal arms embossed on the top towards him, and wrote each word with tedious care.

When he finished he had compiled a fairly accurate description of Shaugnessy, including not only his physical characteristics but little illuminating touches of character that would have done credit to a professional novelist.

He handed the result to a clerk. "All-station message," he said briefly. "Repeat in informations." He cocked his eyes at Larkett. "There's no photograph of Shaugnessy?"

"No."

"That's all right, then. Tell Mr. Mulvaney I'd like to speak to him when he comes in." The clerk vanished. The superintendent went on: "There, that's done with. Unfortunately, I haven't a single man to spare left in the building. They're all out on the big round-up. They'll telephone or come up here as they finish, and I'll

turn 'em on to Shaugnessy. It's your move now, Captain Larkett."

The Secret Service man rasped a finger along his upper lip. Quite apart from the Special Branch, his department had facilities for finding Shaugnessy and dealing with them. Yet the Intelligence had plenty to occupy its staff, and he was loth to make extra demands on its energy. The Scotland Yard organisation would have to be used to the full.

"First of all," he said thoughtfully, "we must let Shaugnessy have his advertisement. I think just 'Accepted' will do. Will you get that sent round to *The Times* for me?"

"Accepted?" repeated Strang.

"Yes, certainly, accepted," said Larkett sharply. "Once he starts negotiating we have him. That's all, I think, for the moment. We mustn't lose sight of the big affair by looking after this. I dare say you'd like to stay here for a while, Jack. Mr. Lever won't mind, and you'll know here as quick as anywhere if anything happens. I'm going round to Connaught Square to see if I can pick up anything there."

"As you like," said Strang, although he was quivering for action; and Larkett left them.

His face was very grave as he made his way westward, and he revolved the new development of the problem in his mind from many angles. His friendship for Jack Strang did not blind him to the fact that the chief factors of the case were

altered very little by Betty Carstairs' disappearance. She was merely an individual, and individuals could not be considered, however hard their fate, while the interests of the nation were in jeopardy. If she was traced, well and good. If she was not—well, it mattered very little, except to her friends. It was not likely, in any event, that her return would help in tracing the copies of the plans.

His sympathies were all with the girl and with Strang. He knew, nevertheless, that he had no right to allow himself to be diverted from the main track of his investigation. The Government was relying on him, and on him would descend the blame should the secret of the S. and B. aeroplanes reach Germany.

On the other hand, Shaugnessy was probably the most dangerous of the Teuton emissaries that he had to fear. The Irishman had proved himself capable of eluding even the astute staff of the Special Branch—more than that, he had shown himself reckless in the pursuit of his object. If he had eluded observation once, he might again —and the second time he might have the plans. That risk could not be run. So far his duty jumped with his inclination, for it would not do to let Shaugnessy remain out of sight. He had to be found, and if the girl could be found too, so much the better.

His inquiries at Connaught Square did not help him much. He saw Betty's aunt and her maid, who were now becoming alarmed at her prolonged

absence. To them he revealed himself as a friend of Strang.

It was the maid who helped him most. Miss Carstairs, she said, had received a note which manifestly agitated her. She had immediately rung up Mr. Strang, but he was not in. She had gone out, promising to be back for lunch, and it had been supposed she was with her father.

"I am extremely obliged to you," said Larkett. "I hardly think it likely that Miss Carstairs has come to harm, but if she does not return some time this evening I will go to Scotland Yard myself."

He stood on the steps outside for a second in silent thought, and moved away at last so preoccupied that he had no sense of direction. Presently he recognised that he had come into Clarges Street, and grinned sheepishly to himself as he halted abruptly.

"An instance of common sense induced by absent-mindedness," he murmured. "I guess Dolly Malchester might be able to help."

Lady Malchester's house lay a few paces to his right. It was evident that he was a privileged visitor, for he did not present a card, and the servant ushered him straight into a small rose-coloured room, half boudoir, half business office. A severe, business-like roll-top desk was balanced by a dainty couch. One side of the room was lined by books—not novels—on plain open shelves, and a few delicate water-colours were scattered on the walls.

Larkett sat on a couch and waited. In a little, Lady Malchester's slim figure was outlined in the doorway. A clinging gown of dark grey, relieved by a touch of vivid scarlet at the breast, displayed her graceful figure to perfection. She exhaled a fragrance of some delicate odour. An intelligent, high-bred face was framed in an aureole of dense black hair—a triumph of the hairdresser's art. Her brown eyes and perfect teeth flashed in an inquiring smile as she welcomed him.

"I didn't expect you, after seeing you at lunch," she said. "I've done all I can—which is very little. There is a slump in fashionable spies."

She twisted her skirt and sank on the couch by his side, one slim arm stretched carelessly along the back of the couch. He crossed his legs.

"For which some thanks to a certain young lady of my acquaintance. The country would be surprised if it knew what it owed to a Society butterfly."

She smiled at him. "Thanks," she said, with a little touch of irony. "You've come here to pass away an idle half-hour, of course. I recognise the symptoms. When you begin by throwing clumsy compliments at me I have vast suspicions that you want me for something in particular."

"I'd hate to deceive you, Dolly," laughed Larkett. "I do want something. May I smoke? Do you mind?"

She gave an assent, and surveyed him with her innocent, beautiful face, full of a childlike curiosity.

" Do you know Shaugnessy ? " he asked.

" Let me see ! " She went to the desk, flung it open, and picking up a pen, rattled the end of it between her white teeth. " No—yes, somehow or somewhere I've heard that name. He's not a very big man, is he ? "

" It's only lately I've come to think so," said Larkett. " He's been one of those gentlemen in the background—no common or garden spy, but a true-blue Britisher who could pull the strings for Germany without suspicion. But he's right in the centre of the stage at the moment."

She furrowed her brows. " I've got an idea. It was in prehistoric times—a year or two before the war broke out." She rummaged at the back of her desk and captured a tiny red morocco-covered notebook. Moistening her forefinger, she slipped the pages over. " Yes. I knew there was a woman. Where's her name ? Ah, here it is ! She calls herself Mme Levitska—an interesting person who knows some good people. You remember that man Loast—a young clerk in the War Office ? She had a friend named Shaugnessy. No one ever seemed to be able to show that he had anything to do with it."

" I'll wager he did though," muttered Larkett thoughtfully. " You've put your finger on it. She's probably in this too."

" I *am* a clever person," she laughed. " You will come to appreciate my possibilities yet. Is this Levitska person at large, though ? "

He nodded. "That War Office episode was only a suspicion; Loast never admitted that she had anything to do with it, and we never traced anything else to her. Naturally, we made inquiries at the outbreak of hostilities, and she seemed quite innocuous. It was thought that you might have been mistaken."

"I am never mistaken," she announced definitely. "But while you're talking of cabbages and kings you've never said what you want."

"It's a case of kidnapping—or, rather, abduction." In two phrases he had given her the salient points.

She considered with one manicured finger resting on her chin, a pose which she knew became her. "I know Betty Carstairs," she said. "A rather nice child."

"About two years younger than yourself."

"In age, but"—she wagged her head wisely—"oh, how different in experience!"

"Well, will you find her?" he asked bluntly.

She arched her eyebrows. "My dear man, don't be impatient. I can't perform miracles. I'll do my best."

Larkett had put another string to his bow. He knew how supple was the resource, how tenacious the courage, of Lady Malchester, and though he had invariably used her in cases where finesse and delicacy were required rather than in the rough and tumble of ordinary investigation work, he had no fear that it would be

her fault if she failed. It may have been her looks or her manner, or both, but my lady had a way of obtaining information where a man, no matter how tactful or diplomatic, would fail utterly.

"Thank you," he said simply. "May I use the 'phone? I'll see if the Yard people have got anything fresh to work on."

For three minutes he was busy. Suddenly she saw his body straighten up tense. He whirled about to her, receiver in hand.

"Can you be at St. Thomas's Hospital at seven o'clock this evening?" he demanded.

She nodded. "Yes. What is it?"

He slipped the receiver back with a bang upon its hook. "Shaugnessy," he declared, with a sort of chagrined admiration. "That man has got a wire-drawn armour-plated nerve. You'd scarcely believe that he's calmly been to St. Thomas's Hospital to inquire how Brockford is. He must have known that we are keeping a strict eye on that gentleman. Perhaps he hoped that his very audacity would prevent him being spotted. Anyway, he wasn't able to see Brockford, and he's going back at half-past seven."

"I'm beginning to feel that I shall fall in love with Mr. Shaugnessy," she said. "Doesn't that deter you from the scheme of putting me on his trail?"

"I'll risk it," he declared. "You've not seen the Irishman."

"Supposing I am proof against his fascina-

tions, then ? " she asked. " What is it you want me to do ? "

He glanced at her slantingly. " I want you to find out where Betty Carstairs is. I can't make any suggestions."

" You'll give me a fair field. No detectives there, or anything."

He hesitated.

" I won't touch it if you don't let me work my own way without risk of someone else bungling," she threatened.

" I don't want to hamper you," he said, " but I don't want to lose Shaugnessy. Besides, he's absolutely ruthless—and he's in love with the girl."

She laughed merrily. " Meaning that I mustn't overestimate my attractions," she said. " Never mind. I shall call a policeman if he isn't polite."

" That's all very well——" he objected.

She put her two hands on his shoulders and pushed him towards the door. " Go away," she said. " You shall have Shaugnessy's scalp, or "—she released her hands and struck a melodramatic attitude—" I'll die in the attempt."

Out on the landing Larkett addressed the closed door, " That's all very well, but I'm hanged if I like it."

CHAPTER XV

FROM among a chaos of cipher telegrams, private tape messages, and cryptic telephone messages, Superintendent Lever had produced an orderly pile of succinct reports. They summarised particulars of each person caught in the great drag-net that had been cast. The detective's pipe was in full blast, and he worked with methodical precision.

At the other side of the table sat Larkett. He was in his shirt-sleeves, for the room was warm, and he scanned each report with narrowed eyes. Now and again he referred to a notebook by his side, where he had jotted down in Greek characters some facts that had reached the house at Brixton. If he ever, by any mischance, lost the notebook, odds were against the finder understanding Greek.

Many of the reports were still incomplete—indeed it was unlikely that they would ever be completed. Of necessity the majority of those persons who had been captured were people against whom there was only hazy and indefinite suspicion. Months and months before, the majority of those against whom anything approaching certainty could be felt had been dealt with.

The fact increased the difficulties of the situation. All over the country the prisoners had to be subjected to question and cross-question, and inquiry and investigation had been set on foot. From the point of view of Larkett and his allies it was all necessary. But it all took time.

The Secret Service man put aside the last report and lit a fresh cigarette. "Nothing very much there," said he. He stood up and stretched himself.

Lever suppressed a yawn. The sorting of documents is a wearisome job, no matter how enthusiastic one may be. "It's getting on for seven," he said significantly. "Shall I send someone across to St. Thomas's or will Winter keep that in hand?"

"That's all arranged, thanks," answered Larkett. "By the way, where's Strang? He was with you when I left."

"Went out with Winter somewhere. Perhaps he's in his room."

Larkett looked thoughtful. "Does he know that Shaugnessy is going to the hospital?" he asked.

"He was here when we talked it over. Hallo, what's the matter?"

The question was addressed to emptiness, for Larkett had abruptly left the room and walked quickly to Winter's office. The door was locked. A fat man came from a little cupboard of a room opposite and looked inquiringly at Larkett.

"Mr. Winter out?" queried the Secret Service man.

"He's with the Commissioner, sir," answered the man.

"There was a gentleman with him?"

"You mean Mr. Strang? Oh yes. He went out by himself not five minutes ago."

Larkett thanked the man and swore under his breath. He had a full appreciation of Jack Strang's qualities, but he also knew something of the quick impulsiveness of the young airman. Under the stress of agitation there was no telling to what unwise action he might be moved. In that matter the airman was hardly responsible for himself. The Secret Service man did not doubt that his friend had gone round to St. Thomas's Hospital in the hope of intercepting Shaugnessy. Winter, he told himself peevishly, ought to have foreseen that before he talked in front of Strang. Perhaps the spy would be scared off, or perhaps Strang might make a move in his headstrong way and spoil Lady Malchester's plans. Something would have to be done. His own influence might prevail to guide his friend, but it would only double the risk of alarming Shaugnessy if he, too, permitted himself to be seen in the vicinity of the hospital.

These considerations passed through his agile brain while he was walking along the corridor to the lift. An idea had already formed in his mind when he knocked at the Commissioner's.

Not half a mile away Strang was slowly pacing

the pavement, alert for any sign of Shaugnessy. It was one of those warm, sluggish nights, with that miserable dampness that is something more than fog and something less than rain. The weather had given him an excuse to turn up his coat collar, and in Westminster Bridge Road he had bought a cheap cap, which he had exchanged for his bowler as affording more protection for his face.

He had little idea of what he should do if he saw Shaugnessy. That he was leaving to the spur of the moment. He had a vague idea that he might be able to follow the spy himself unperceived and so trace Betty's hiding-place. Winter might have enlightened him upon the difficulties of "shadowing"—a work which needs skill and experience—had he known anything of Strang's intentions in time. But he had not.

In a few minutes Strang had discovered one big mistake. He was loitering on the opposite side of the way to the hospital entrance, confident that he would have under observation all who passed in or out without himself being conspicuous. But he had not reckoned on taxi-cabs. One drew up at the doorway, entirely blocking his view of the person who descended upon the other side. He hurriedly crossed the road, forgetful of his wish to keep out of sight. Whoever had got out of the cab had vanished.

Strang leaned against the railings. He would

not make that mistake again. If it was Shaugnessy he would see him come out, anyway.

A policeman strode up to him, bluffly authoritative. "You can't hang about here, sir," he said. "Why don't you go home?"

It was a piece of gratuitous impertinence to Strang in his present mood. He was doing no harm by the railings. He snapped out some angry reply and the constable at once made a snatch at his wrist.

From nowhere, as it seemed, another constable caught him at the other side. He had no chance to struggle effectively, for though he was a strong man he had been taken at a disadvantage.

"Better take it gently, sir," said the second constable quietly, and he was swung along by the momentum of the two big men across the road and into a by-street with the usual nondescript crowd that springs out of nowhere on such occasions.

He wriggled quietly but impotently. "This is an outrage!" he declared fiercely. "I shall report you to the Commissioner. Why have you arrested me?"

"Roaming ravin' drunk, ain't he, Jim?" grinned one of his captors.

Strang ceased his futile resistance. He had seen charges against the police of preferring unfounded accusations against inoffensive wayfarers, but had always believed them the fantastic imaginings of cranks. His common sense told him that a loss of temper would only give a colour of right to an unjustifiable proceeding. He

walked quietly. They came into the main street somewhere near the Canterbury Music Hall and the escort swelled. Strang found himself the object of outspoken sympathy. Round about the New Cut to be " pinched " is to join a great guild of freemasonry, as it were.

Some ingenious soul had set alight a rumour that he had been caught picking pockets near an electric car stopping-place, and the interest in him increased. Chagrined as he was, he was relieved when the blue lamp standing out over Kennington Lane Police Station told him that his journey was at an end.

A reserved constable at the door scattered the mob and his two captors took him swiftly up the steps. He caught a glimpse of a bare room, the only furniture of which seemed to be a deal table, a tall desk, the stool, and a little iron dock with a large rule divided into feet and inches behind it, and then he was hurried through a door labelled " C.I.D.," and the grip on his arm relaxed.

He stared with amazement into the smiling faces of Winter and Larkett.

" You here ? " he gasped. " What does this mean ? Is it a joke ? Because if it is——" His anger had returned fourfold now.

" It's not a joke, old chap," said Larkett soothingly. " We had to fetch you away from the hospital without attracting notice. We were afraid you might spoil our arrangements."

" Is this what you call without attracting notice ? Why, there was a mob as big as at a

Lord Mayor's Show." Strang was still heated. "I'd have come away if you had sent me a message—though why you should let Shaugnessy have a clear field is more than I understand."

"I told you Captain Larkett would deal with Shaugnessy," interposed Winter.

"Deal with him!" exclaimed Strang indignantly. "There isn't a soul there——"

Both the other men laughed. "If you'd seen through my arrangements I should have been disappointed," said Larkett. "I'm sorry, old chap, that we put you to any humiliation. We couldn't send a message, because we weren't sure you would obey it, and neither Winter, Lever, nor I could come ourselves without risk of being seen by Shaugnessy and giving him the hint that something was afloat. We had to get you away quickly, by Jove! And the only inconspicuous force that could be applied was arrest by officers in uniform."

"Inconspicuous!" gasped Strang. "Inconspic——"

"In the circumstances, yes," said Larkett. "Anyone not close to you would not have recognised you. The officers had orders to cover you as much as possible, and, of course, the crowd hid you."

"Very ingenious," admitted Strang, more coolly. "All the same, I wish you had thought of some less unpleasant way than having me manhandled by a couple of common constables."

The Secret Service man put his hand on his

shoulder. "If that's what's ruffling your dignity, old man," he rallied, "you can quiet down. They weren't constables—at least, not common constables. They were two of the most reliable detective-inspectors we could get from Scotland Yard, and they haven't worn the blue uniform for —how long?" he questioned Winter.

"Ten or fifteen years," answered the superintendent.

CHAPTER XVI

LADY DOROTHY MALCHESTER was clad in a neat grey walking costume, which was becoming without being conspicuous. She had dismissed her car at the Houses of Parliament, and had joined the throng passing southwards across Westminster Bridge. The languorous Society woman had disappeared.

Her small, well-shod feet trod the pavement with a resolute swing, as though she were a typist used to walking home a part of the way from business for the sake of exercise every night. Indeed, there was little to distinguish her from the scores of business girls who were now passing over the bridge, save her uncommon prettiness. It needed a woman's eye to recognise that the grey walking costume must have been fashioned by some great costumier.

Like Strang, her objective was St. Thomas's Hospital. She turned out of Westminster Bridge Road and walked slowly along beside the railings, watchful but entirely self-confident. Her face wrinkled in a little grimace of disgust to what she conceived to be a spectacle of a drunken man being arrested by two constables across the road.

So she came to the visitors' entrance and ventured to question the porter.

He shook his head. "Sorry, miss. It's not a visitors' day, and no one is allowed to see a patient without permission."

"The house-surgeon," she suggested. "Perhaps——"

The Cerberus shot a suspicious glance at her from under his heavy eyebrows. "You're not from a newspaper, are you, miss? The house-surgeon's very busy and he doesn't want to be worried. I am authorised to give the newspapers any information."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Lady Malchester, and her face fell. She had no great anxiety to see a house-surgeon, but she felt it as well to assume chagrin. The porter's hint was not wasted. The rôle of a newspaper woman would justify a little curiosity.

"Yes, I am from a newspaper," she added and smiled her sweetest smile into the porter's face. Even he felt its influence. He shifted his feet uneasily. He could deal with men and with some women, but this handsome girl had an indefinable way that made it difficult to refuse her. Bigger men than the hospital porter had felt the same sensation.

"I got strict orders, miss," he stammered. "I could take your card, but it wouldn't be no good. The house-surgeon wouldn't see you."

"It is unfortunate," she insisted, pondering with one slim gloved forefinger on the tip of her chin.

"Anything I can do for you, miss, you're welcome," said the porter.

"Now that is good of you." She rewarded him with another smile. "I suppose some of Mr. Brockford's friends have been to see him?"

"Oh yes. Quite a lot of 'em. There's been Miss Carstairs—that's his stepdaughter—and another lady she came with yesterday—I think her aunt. Mr. Winter from Scotland Yard was here to-day and another gentleman called, but he had to arrange about seeing him, and he's coming back. I don't know his name. He's likely to be here any time now."

Her face lightened. "Thanks ever so much. Could I wait for this gentleman? He might be able to tell me something when he comes out. You've got no instructions about that?"

His grim visage brightened in sympathy. "No, miss, I've got no instructions to stop anyone waiting. Mind you, I wouldn't do it for everyone. But you sit tight, and I'll see what I can do. What paper did you say you represented?"

"*The Evening Wire*," she answered promptly.

"That'll be all right, then. You sit tight. Would you like to look at the evening paper?"

She waited, seated on a hard Windsor chair, in the darkest recess she could select in the room. She read the evening paper determinedly through, now and again glancing at her watch.

Shaugnessy was certainly late. She wondered if that nerve of which Larkett had spoken had failed him. She put the paper down and her toe

beat a silent tattoo on the floor. It was well beyond eight o'clock when a burly shadow darkened the doorway. Hastily she resumed the paper as Shaugnessy walked in. He took little notice of the unobtrusive woman hidden behind *The Evening Wire.*

" Good evening," he said. " I'm a little late. How is Mr. Brockford ? "

" Mr. Brockford's still unconscious, sir," answered the official. " If you come this way the house-surgeon will see you. He's expecting you."

The fat man waddled away in his wake. Lady Malchester dropped the paper and gazed after him. " I wonder ? " she said thoughtfully to herself.

It was little more than a quarter of an hour when he returned. She touched him lightly on the arm as he was passing through the door.

" Will you spare me a moment ? I should be awfully grateful if you would. You are a friend of Mr. Brockford's, are you not ? "

He looked into a pair of shining brown eyes with a mixture of entreaty and command in their depths, and was lost. There was something artlessly ingenuous and appealing about Lady Malchester when she chose, and although Shaugnessy was too experienced not to be on his guard with women he made a swift and totally incorrect judgment. His hat was in his hand in an instant.

" Sure ! " he exclaimed. " I think I may call

myself a friend of Brockford's. What can I do for you ? "

" I'm on a newspaper," she explained. " My people wanted me to see if I could get any fresh facts about the railway outrage. You don't mind me pulling you up ? "

She saw the uncertainty in his face. He had an eye for pretty women, but he had no wish to prolong his stay at the hospital for no purpose. If there was what he deemed an adequate reason for increasing a risk he would take it. But there was no adequate reason.

A man he would have snubbed ; a plain woman would probably have shared the same fate. And although he did not think, from her appearance and manner, that Lady Malchester was engaged on the side of the forces working against him, she might be. She had calculated adroitly when she had seized the opportunity to adopt the rôle of journalist. So she had been able to effect an abrupt introduction while arousing the minimum of suspicion.

" I'm in a hurry," he said.

" You will tell me what you know about the case, won't you ? " she pleaded, and the half refusal that was on his lips was never uttered. A smile came instead.

" I'm afraid I can't help you much," he said. " However, my cab is waiting. If you like I can give you a lift, and you can put any questions."

Exultation flamed in Lady Malchester's breast. Something of it showed in her face, but that did

not matter. He would attribute that to her triumph in securing an interview for her paper. "I'm so grateful," she gushed. "You see, I have only just taken up journalism, and it will mean so much to me."

He smiled in sympathy with her enthusiasm. But he was not so distracted by her that he failed to take a swift scrutinising glance round as he stepped into the cab. "He wants to see if anyone's watching," meditated Lady Malchester.

The Irishman followed her into the cab and sat down heavily. She produced a notebook with a professional air. She was not well enough acquainted with journalism to know that it is only beginners who paralyse their victim's freedom of tongue by the production of pencil and paper.

Shaugnessy answered her questions freely enough. He did not worry about publicity. This girl did not know who he was, and if by chance any of her questions became awkward, he had fluency. Gradually, however, his replies grew more and more random.

It had been a long shot that had taken him to the hospital—the chance that there might have been something of importance which the injured man would be able to explain, on regaining consciousness, regarding his actions. That his mission had proved futile—for Brockford still remained in a stupor—was nothing to the point. He had calculated that the possibility of such a visit would not occur to his opponents, and that

its very boldness would enable him to proceed with it undetected.

He did not underrate the intelligence of those arraigned against him, and there had always been an uneasy feeling at the back of his mind that they might, after all, divine his intentions. Somehow this uneasiness had recurred. It was a matter of instinct.

All the while he had been alert for anything that might show they had picked up his trail, and he was sure that there had been no one watching outside the hospital. Nor had there been any vehicle in which he could be followed. He had arranged to meet these contingencies if necessary, and he was puzzled at his own success in that it was apparently not necessary to carry the arrangements into effect. Apparently both the Secret Service and Scotland Yard had both been thrown off.

"Queer, very queer," he told himself, and twiddled his thumbs uneasily.

All at once a fleeting suspicion leapt to his mind. His heavy, moon-like face turned full on his companion, and a thoughtful frown came to his forehead. She looked up from her notebook in artless astonishment at his steady stare, and the frown vanished.

"You didn't tell me your name, Miss——"

"Blake," she answered readily. "Evelyn Blake. And that reminds me, I haven't asked you yours. Of course I won't publish it unless you wish."

"Mine—oh, mine's John Smith," he answered shortly. "Have you a card on you? I'm afraid I haven't been much use, but if I learn any more I'll let you know."

She fumbled in her hand-bag, and looked up at him at last with a rueful face. "There! How stupid of me. I've come out without one. But I'll write my name down, and then you won't forget it, will you?"

Tearing a slip of note-paper from her notebook she scribbled on it, "Evelyn Blake, *Evening Wire*, Fleet Street," and handed it to him. He folded it up and placed it in his waistcoat pocket.

"Haven't we met somewhere before, Miss Blake?" he asked. "I seem to recall your face."

"I don't think so," she returned. "Now tell me, Mr. Smith——" She took refuge in another question.

By now his suspicions were fiercely at work. He had paid no very strict attention to her features at first, but now he had scrutinised her with a steady stare, and gleams of memory began to stir. The woman, quick-witted as himself, guessed the thoughts that were throbbing at his brain. Both of them were used to outward control, and neither showed any sign that anything was amiss. Once Shaugnessy put his head out of the window and the cab slowed down. He gave some directions in a low voice to the driver.

Lady Malchester waited till he had reseated himself. Then she calmly folded her note-

book. "I shall be glad if you will put me down now, Mr. Smith," she said. "I have only just time to catch the last edition of my paper."

He grinned openly at her. Recollection had come to him and he felt on safer ground. "It would be a terrible thing if you were to miss the last edition of your paper," he said. "Somehow, I fancy that this little interview of ours will never get into print."

She looked at him wide-eyed. "I don't quite understand," she said coldly.

"You are doing yourself an injustice," he remarked. "I think you understand quite well. We've carried this little game of yours quite far enough. Don't you think there ought to be another act—Lady Malchester?"

Her face did not change. She was drawing on the glove which she had taken off for more freedom in writing, and continued steadily coaxing it on without looking up. She made one more effort.

"You know me," she said. "I shall rely on your honour, Mr. Smith. One has to make a living, and *The Evening Wire* is generous."

"You mean to say you really are on *The Evening Wire*?" Shaugnessy's voice was mockingly incredulous. "My dear woman, it won't do." He laid a fat forefinger in the palm of his hand. "It won't do, you know."

She moved sideways away from him, and he laughed with a touch of cynical appreciation. Now that he felt the situation was in his hands

he was in better humour. He shook his head reprovingly.

"Your face should be your fortune, Lady Malchester. In an *ingénue* rôle on the stage, now—the artless miss from school. 'Pon my word, you nearly had me guessing, as they say in the States. But your photograph's been in the papers too often. And then a journalist without any card. You were clever, but you made mistakes. It was Larkett put you up to this, of course? Scotland Yard doesn't employ women of your calibre."

If he thought to disconcert her with his banter he was mistaken. She shifted her ground with readiness. "You are too clever for me, Mr. Shaugnessy," she said, and dropped her hands helplessly in her lap.

"So you do know my name," he said. "And you think I'm too clever for you. I'm not altogether sure of that, you know. Even now I am not quite certain what your game is."

A low ripple of musical laughter shook her. She was trying to decide her course of action. "That's easily explained," she answered, with a great appearance of frankness. "I want to find out what *your* game is. As I can hardly hope to do that now, perhaps you will stop the cab and let me out."

"You've got nerve, anyhow, Lady Malchester," he commented admiringly. "If only you were on my side I'd have had those plans long ago. However, I guess I'd better let you go."

He thrust his huge bulk through the window opening. Lady Malchester smiled mysteriously at his broad back. Then, for a woman whose consummate control of herself was proverbial among the few who knew her intimately, she did a strange thing. With a sobbing moan she leaned back her head and went off in a convincing faint.

The cab was stopping when Shaugnessy withdrew his head into the interior. A flicker of surprise crossed his face as the woman dropped. "Not so much nerve after all," he muttered.

Then his thoughts whirled to something else. "Don't stop," he cried to the driver. "Get on. The lady doesn't want to get out here now."

CHAPTER XVII

THE loneliness of the locked room had begun to play on Betty Carstairs' nerves. Lunch she had sent away untouched, but tea she had welcomed. The appetite of youth refused to be stifled for long. Once Mme Levitska had looked in with an offer to bear her company for an hour, and had accepted Betty's snub with a tolerant smile. But thereafter the girl had been left alone.

There was a pile of books and magazines on the table, but whenever she attempted to read she found that her mind was incapable of detachment from her own position. She had walked to and fro—twelve paces each way—for an hour in the hope that physical weariness would bring her relief in sleep. The engravings and crude water-colours on the wall she had inspected till she knew them by heart, from " The Stag at Bay " to a " View of Naples."

She almost wished Shaugnessy would come back. He might let fall some hint as to what was happening. Her gold wristlet watch told her that eight o'clock had gone. Her people must have missed her long ago. They would be searching for her—probably they would think she had been the victim of some street accident.

Who would hazard the wild supposition that she was being kept a prisoner in the heart of London ?

Stretched at full length on the couch she forced herself to review matters methodically. Jack Strang might have a suspicion of the truth when he found she was missing. But a suspicion could not help her. No one knew she had gone to meet Shaugnessy. She had been tricked so simply that only by accident could any trace have been left behind, and Shaugnessy was not the sort of man who made accidents.

There was no means by which she could communicate with the outside. Mme Levitska herself had brought her her meals, and though she knew there were other people in the house she had seen no one. Was it because they did not know she was a prisoner or because it was feared they might succumb to persuasion or bribery ? She dismissed the first supposition, but the second stuck in her mind. It afforded a forlorn hope that she might have a chance. It was the only possibility that she could see.

A stumbling of feet outside the door and then the rasp of a key in the lock caused her to jump to her feet. Her reason told her that it was impossible the interruption could be of any advantage to her, but her heart thudded irregularly for all that. She was ready to snatch at the slightest shred of hope.

Into the room came three persons—Shaugnessy and Mme Levitska supporting a woman between them. The woman walked unsteadily ; her

feet seemed rather to fall forward as the others willed than to move of their own volition.

The feminine in Betty was alight in an instant. In a glow of sympathy she rushed forward, and pushing the Irishman aside, took the arm that he had held.

"It's only a faint," declared Mme Levitska calmly. "Let's lay her on the couch. There, that's better. She'll be all right in a second."

Shaugnessy held out a pocket flask. "It's brandy," he said. "See if you can get her to sip a little."

It was Betty who took the flask. She poured out about a spoonful into the metal cup, and placing her arm under the other woman's head, held it to her lips. For the moment the unconscious woman was hidden from both Mme Levitska and Shaugnessy. The brown eyes opened. One of them flickered at Betty in an unmistakable wink.

Some of the spirit flowed over the chin as Betty's hand shook. She gave a quick exclamation, and dabbed at the other's face with a ridiculous handkerchief. The eyes had closed again promptly.

"What's wrong?" asked Shaugnessy.

"I—I upset the brandy," replied Betty truthfully. "Who is this lady?"

"You don't know her?" questioned the Irishman sharply. "Well, it doesn't matter. I thought you might be lonely. She will help to keep you company."

"She's coming round," said Mme Levitska.

A low, sobbing moan came from the sofa. The

woman slowly drew herself to a sitting position and gazed round dazedly. Betty began to believe that the wink must have been a hallucination. "How did I get here?" she asked dully. She gazed stupidly from one to the other. "How did I get here?" she repeated, with a touch of asperity.

"You fainted," said Shaugnessy succinctly, as though the mere fact were a complete and adequate explanation of everything.

"Oh yes, I remember." She took a long-drawn breath. "How silly of me! Thank you very much, Mr. Shaugnessy. And now, if you will kindly have a cab called, I think I'll go."

"Make your own arrangements," drawled the man quietly. "Don't mind me."

She stood up quickly. Betty saw that the small, neat figure was quivering with some excitement. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded icily.

He made a clumsy bow. "Only that your haste to go is a slur on my hospitality. Why, I have not even introduced you. Permit me. Lady Malchester —Miss Betty Carstairs—Mme Levitska."

It was a queer formality in the circumstances, but Shaugnessy effected the introduction quite as a matter of course. Lady Malchester, if not Betty, appreciated his nonchalance at its full value. Mme Levitska acknowledged the introduction with a stately nod of the head. Betty also bowed—"just as if someone were being presented to me at home," she told herself.

But Lady Malchester did not lose her grip. She suspected every word that Shaugnessy uttered as

having a reason, and was on her guard. Just now she was playing the rôle of the fluttered bird, and it would not do to let the Irishman suppose that she was not as nervous as she appeared.

"These ladies may be friends of yours," she said, facing Shaugnessy and ignoring them completely. "I shall be happy to know them at some other time. But now I must go."

By a quick and unexpected movement she reached the doorway. But Shaugnessy was equally quick. He moved with astonishing rapidity for one of his bulk, and placing both hands to her wrists, lifted her bodily into the room. Lady Malchester's face flamed scarlet.

"You coward!" she exclaimed, and struck him a stinging blow with her clenched fist. He recoiled from her with a hand to his cheek and an angry smile on his lips. Mme Levitska quietly stepped between them.

"You're a vixen all right, all right," he muttered, "I'll get even with you for that, my lady. Come, Madame."

He held the door open ceremoniously and Mme Levitska swept out. His eyes narrowed as he stood half in, half out the doorway surveying the two girls. He seemed about to say something, but suddenly wheeled on his heel, and the door banged behind him.

Betty passed an arm sympathetically round the other woman. Her eyes were glistening. She had forgotten her own case in her feeling for the other. Lady Malchester's face was buried in her hands and

her whole form was shaking. Presently the hands came away, and the girl realised with a shock that her companion was laughing. A natural idea of hysterics occurred to her at once. She gripped the other by the shoulders and shook her roughly.

"Stop it!" she ordered authoritatively. "Stop it at once, do you hear?"

Lady Malchester wrenched herself free and collapsed mirthfully on the couch. "Oh, my dear, my dear!" she gasped. "What a fool the man is! What a fool!"

In Betty's countenance there were balanced relief and uncertainty. It was not hysterics, that was certain. She was more inclined to believe that the shock had sent the other woman out of her mind. Lady Malchester read her thoughts.

"You believe I'm mad, Betty,—you don't mind my calling you Betty, do you? We have been introduced properly somewhere—I forget where. You see I set out to find you, and I have succeeded. And Shaugnessy is so blinded by his own cleverness that he can't see. Did you hear him? He called me a vixen." She made room on the couch, then her tone abruptly altered. "Come and sit down here by me and tell me everything," she said imperatively.

A glow of hope warmed Betty as she obeyed. She was puzzled but happy. "All that just now was acting?" she exclaimed. "How did you find out where I was? Was it Ja—Mr. Strang?"

Lady Malchester's brown eyes danced. "No, it wasn't Ja—Mr. Strang," she mimicked. "It

was just common sense, luck, and the foolishness of Shaugnessy. Why, the man actually believed I really fainted. Did you ? "

"I wasn't sure—after the wink," admitted Betty.

" I did not wink," declared Lady Malchester indignantly. " And anyway," she added illogically, " you nearly gave me away when you upset the brandy."

" I can't see how you got here," said Betty. " Nor why you should risk——"

The other slowly removed her gloves. " I'm a mercenary person, Betty," she declared, twinkling. " I shall be paid. After all, it is sometimes more simple to hoodwink a clever man like Shaugnessy than a fool. Captain Larkett asked me to try to find you. I knew Shaugnessy was going to St. Thomas's Hospital to see your father to-night. I went there to meet him. I told him I was a newspaper girl and asked him for an interview. You see, I wanted to discuss the weak point in his armour. Well, I induced him to invite me into his cab, and I flatter myself I adopted the professional air to a nicety. But he was wary.

" Then I got a kind of indefinite idea that I might prolong the interview till he had reached wherever he was going. I wanted a starting-point. Unfortunately he found out who I was, but he thought I was on quite another quest. He didn't suppose I knew anything about you. He would have turned me out in the street there and then, and have seen that I didn't follow him, but I rather forced his hand by fainting. He couldn't

put an unconscious woman out on the pavement very well without attracting attention, could he?

"It was then that he must have made up his mind that there was less risk in bringing me here than in turning me out neck and crop. So here we are, immured in the same dungeon."

Betty's face fell and her lips trembled a little. Her hopes were dashed. Save that she had a companion, her position was the same. There would be no outside clue. Would it be easier to find two women than one? Something of this she expressed.

"My dear child," said Lady Malchester, with a maternal air that sat oddly upon her, "I don't put my head in a lion's jaw unless I'm fairly sure someone has got hold of my feet to pull me out. All the while I had my notebook out I was writing the names of the streets through which we ran, in shorthand, as well as every word we both said. I also jotted down the number of the cab. Just before I fainted I tore some pages out, folded them up, and wrote on the outside that whoever delivered them to Captain Larkett at his club would receive a sovereign. That has got to him now, I'm certain. I shouldn't be surprised to see him and Mr. Strang walk in here at any moment."

"He may not have got it," insisted Betty. But her wavering pluck had been stiffened by Lady Malchester's serene confidence.

"That's true," admitted the other. "It's unlikely, but true. In that event we shall have to rely on ourselves and this."

She produced a neat little automatic pistol.

CHAPTER XVIII

THERE was one thing Captain Larkett was determined at all hazards to prevent. That was any interference with the plans which Lady Malchester had formed for dealing with Shaugnessy.

He was determined, so far as he could, to give her a clear course. But it needed all his tact and some assumption of authority to keep Strang from rushing back to St. Thomas's Hospital to see if he could pick up any trace of the spy.

The airman was not a fool. He knew that Larkett understood his business and was probably managing the investigation far better than anyone else could do it. His feelings might be compared to those of a passenger in a motor-car being steered through heavy traffic by an expert driver. He felt an almost irresistible desire to have a hand on the wheel. He wanted to do something —the rôle of passive spectator was becoming abhorrent to him.

Something of this Captain Larkett must have guessed, for after they had driven back to Scotland Yard in his big Daimler, Strang felt that he was under a rigorous surveillance. When they went in the back way up the narrow stone staircase to Winter's office the same sensation possessed

him as when he had been "arrested." He felt a prisoner still, and the thought irritated him.

He had been given a big arm-chair in Winter's room while Lever had come to the other two and held a short consultation. Thereafter, although they came and went, apparently exceedingly busy, there never was a moment when he was out of sight of one of the three. Once he ventured an expostulation.

"It's no good you worrying," said Larkett, with a touch of irritability. "What can you do? Even if you should discover anything—and it's no reflection on you to say that's unlikely—you would probably only scare up the game we're trying to bag. Keep quiet, old man."

"Hang it all. It's easy to give advice," retorted Strang. "You ask me to sit still." He gulped, and his gaze wandered to the scarlet geranium on the window-sill. "When I think of Betty . . ."

"We've got to think of more than Betty," answered the other quickly. "Get a grip on yourself, man. I've wasted more time to-day on that part of the affair than I'd do for most men. There's a keener, colder brain than either yours or mine dealing with it. The worst service you can do Miss Carstairs is to blunder in and perhaps hash things now."

Strang shrugged his shoulders. He felt that he was wrong and the Secret Service man right. His reason fought with his emotion for

mastery, but even cold logic could not entirely overmaster the strength of his feeling.

Winter had come in during the exchange of remarks and gone with a distracted air to his desk, where he became intensely engrossed in the contemplation of official forms. In a little he looked up and spoke to Larkett.

"Lever has reduced the possibilities among the people pulled so far to three. Most of the others have more or less cleared themselves. There's a man named Bass down at Devonport, a woman named Luxton at Wandsworth, and another chap—Reginald Cotton—at Highgate."

"Bass and Luxton were among a list of my own," said Larkett. "We made a quiet investigation into their cases some months ago. I very much doubt whether they are spies at all. They've been under observation a long time. Cotton, I believe, was hit on by Lever. I don't know him."

"You'd probably like to see them, anyhow?" suggested Winter.

"Yes. Naturally. There'll be nothing lost by that. Happen to know anything about any of 'em yourself?"

The superintendent placed a scrupulously manicured forefinger on a photograph gummed to one of the blue documents. "I'm not sure—not sure at all," he said. "This man Cotton's uncommonly like a chap I used to know once—but then you can never be certain in a photograph. If we only had his finger-prints now——"

A new light came into his eyes and he stared unseeing at the Secret Service man for a moment. "By gum!" he exclaimed.

Larkett elevated his eyebrows.

"There was a chap of that name who used to be friendly with Yid Foster, and Foster was the chap who put Maxwell up to getting the copies for Brockford." He beat a tattoo on the papers with his fingers. "No," he said dubiously, "it's too big a slice of luck."

There was a glint in the Secret Service man's eyes and his hand went inevitably to his toothbrush moustache. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let me get this clear. This friend of yours—Yid Foster, do you call him?—was the only other person who might know that Maxwell had got copies of the plans for Brockford? That's right, isn't it?"

Winter gave a gesture of assent.

"Very well. And Foster is a friend of Cotton's?"

"That's the idea," said Winter approvingly, "but of course it may all end in smoke."

"You think that Foster may have spoken to Cotton, who may have robbed Brockford of the plans and incidentally shot him?"

"There's a lot of 'may' about it, but that's what's in my mind generally."

"It's a possibility," admitted Larkett thoughtfully; "it's a possibility. Let's hear what Lever's got to say. Funny, though, that I never heard of this chap Cotton."

Lever, self-contained as usual, but with tired eyes, was summoned.

"No, Cotton is not on our regular list," he explained. "If he had been we should have dealt with him long ago. He's only a hanger-on —or, rather, was. Probably some of the smaller German spies found him useful in a sort of way before the war—he knew one or two of them, that's certain. I put him in on chance since we were making a clean sweep. It's quite possible that he never knew a spy as a spy. He may have been used as a tool, though of course this is all surmise on my part. I don't know for certain that he's ever actually had a finger in stirring up trouble for my department."

"H'm," said Larkett between his teeth reflectively.

"You," went on Lever, addressing Winter, "ought to know something about him. He was a petty thief once—and probably is still."

The other superintendent rubbed his hands together and shot a triumphant glance at Larkett.

"I'm beginning to think Providence is really putting out a helping hand. We were just wondering," he added to Lever, "if this gentleman was the one we had had professional relations with before. It makes a considerable difference in our estimate of his importance."

At another time Strang would have been vividly interested in a discussion that touched him so nearly. But now his mind was too full

of forebodings concerning Betty to permit of a proper perspective. His outlook on the matter of the stolen plans had become one of comparative indifference. What was to the others—what had been to him—the vital thing was now a point which he felt to be trivial by the side of the abduction of the girl. Weariness of mind and body had affected a cold vision.

Larkett's body stiffened as he thought the matter out. Tortuous as are the subways which the Secret Service has at times to pursue—even when the country is at peace—they rarely lead to the professional criminal as such engaged in what may be called political crime. The ordinary criminal is not often found to be concerned in matters of espionage unless he is engaged blindly as Jimmy Maxwell had been to undertake a particular task with no knowledge of its significance.

Spying is a specialist business demanding peculiar attributes which few criminals are likely to possess. The ordinary spy, whatever his morals in his vocation, is, as a rule, a man of orderly character from the police point of view.

The more he pondered the more the Secret Service man was inclined to adopt Winter's idea. Much of the hypothetical part of the theory had been shorn away by the revelation of Cotton's identity with the sneak-thief the Criminal Investigation Department had known. It was true that there were men and women employed by Germany who would not have hesitated at murder

for a moment in order to get possession of the plans. Shaugnessy himself was such a one.

On the other hand, nothing but desperate necessity or desperate temptation when all other courses had failed would be likely to bring them to take the risk.

On this hypothesis it was possible to base a theory. First, the man who fired the shot in the railway carriage must have known of the copies that had passed into Brockford's possession. Secondly, he must have deemed them of sufficient value to make the crime worth the risk. A knowledge of their value implied that he would know to some extent where to dispose of them. Maxwell was out of the question. He could have kept the copies or made fresh copies for himself. There remained Foster—and Foster's friend Cotton. Yes, decidedly things were pointing very much to that latter individual. The circle was narrowing.

It was Winter who broke the silence. "I'll have the records searched for as much of Cotton's career as we've got," he said. "And meanwhile it won't do any harm if I put a man or two on to trace his movements on the day that Brockford was shot." He turned his chair, blew down a speaking-tube, and gave some quick instructions.

"I agree that it seems promising," said Larkett. "I think the first thing to do now is to go and see Cotton. You'll be able to come with me, Mr. Lever, I suppose? It may be that you'll under-

stand how to handle him better if he happens to be obstinate."

"Yes. I'll be glad to come along," said Lever. "How about you, Winter?"

Winter shook his head. "I'll stay here on deck," he said; "I may be wanted. I want to make sure that Cotton was in this train affair. I can do more good here than with you."

Larkett turned a puzzled eye on Strang. "I'm not quite certain about you, Jack," he said. "I think you'd better stay here. You see," he added in anticipation of remonstrance, "there is really no use in your turning out. If anything develops you will learn of it here as quickly as anywhere."

Strang was by no means satisfied with the position of inaction thus allotted to him, but he saw the futility of protest. "As you like," he agreed.

"By the way," added Larkett, "I told my club to ring up here if any message came for me. You might send round for it if it does."

"Right you are," agreed Winter. "I wish you luck."

Lever was already swathed in a greatcoat, collar well turned up, and now Larkett struggled into his own coat and joined him.

"We'll probably ring you up from Highgate," said the former as they left the room.

CHAPTER XIX

LARKETT'S big car made short work of the five or six miles' run out to Highgate. At the police-station one of the clerkly-looking detectives of the Special Branch swung out to hold the door open for them as they descended.

"Hallo, O'Grady!" said Lever. "Our bird's safe, I hope?"

"Quite safe, sir—a little annoyed perhaps. We've cleared out the recreation-room for you to have a talk with him. He's very anxious to know why he's detained."

"Ah yes; what have you told him?"

O'Grady grinned. "*We* don't know why he's detained, sir. We're only acting on orders received from headquarters. He says he's entitled to know the charge against him, and to pacify him we said it *might* be pocket-picking. Some of the divisional detectives here know him."

Lever eyed his subordinate sternly, and O'Grady's grin faded. "Have you been talking?" he asked. He menaced the man with outstretched forefinger, and the young detective flushed. "If I find you loose-lipped to anyone—*anyone* inside or outside the service, do you understand?—it'll be——" He jerked his

thumb backward over his shoulder in a significant gesture. The glint of his eyes told that he was coldly ruthless, and the gleam of his teeth showed through his beard. To talk too much is a deadly sin in the Criminal Investigation Department, and more especially in the Special Branch.

"I said no more than necessary, sir," stammered O'Grady.

"We'll see about that later," said Lever grimly. "Take us up now."

A constable stood aside from the door of a big airy room on the first floor to allow them to enter.

Lever nodded dismissal to him. "You needn't wait. We'll be responsible."

The windows overlooked the main street. On the walls were photographs of rifle-teams, cricketers, and enlarged presentments of chief officers. On one or two tables there were piles of papers and magazines.

A lean, stunted man of sullen appearance, apparently something over thirty, was in an arm-chair by the window. He made no attempt to rise as the visitors entered. He stared at them defiantly.

Lever took off his hat, placed it on a billiard-table, and pulled off his coat. "Well, Cotton," he said, "I'm sorry to see you here."

The prisoner surveyed him searchingly from under white eyebrows that gave a curiously sinister appearance to his pale face. He had thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and

jingled some keys, as though to show he was quite at ease.

"You're a divisional inspector, I s'pose," he growled, in a deep bass voice, unnatural for one of his size and appearance. "Well, you've made a howler this time, guv'nor. This is a matter for the Home Secretary, this is. You haven't got any right to keep me here without charging me with anything. I'll get compensation for this, you see."

The superintendent smiled grimly under his beard. He made no attempt to enlighten the man in regard to his rank.

"So you think you're going to make a fuss, do you?" He shook his head reprovingly. "I wouldn't, Cotton, if I were you. I really wouldn't."

The other's face contorted into a sneer. "D'you think I care a tinker's curse what you would do or wouldn't do? I know what I'll do, and that's enough for me."

"I guess it is," said Lever mildly. "What's this I hear about picking pockets? If you're as innocent as you say you are, you'll be able to prove your movements this last day or two. I expect they'd let you go then if they were satisfied."

An oath slipped from the prisoner's lips. "You bet I'll satisfy you. Why, there's any amount of people can tell you I couldn't pick a pocket if I tried. I'm a respectable man. How can I prove where I was yesterday? But I can prove

that I wasn't picking pockets. Never mind. I'll get my own back." He jingled his keys fiercely. "You wait till I see a lawyer."

The superintendent was in no hurry. He accepted the outburst with grave passivity, apparently more interested in things outside the window than in Cotton. Suddenly he barked out a question:

"What's your trade?"

"Traveller on commission," retorted Cotton quickly. Although Larkett's face did not move, he was amused at the swift parry of the question. It was evident that Cotton had anticipated such a query and had prepared his answer. A traveller on commission is one of those persons who can justly plead the difficulty of proving where they were on any particular day.

The superintendent fingered the point of his beard unemotionally. "Ah!" he said. "Who employs you?"

Cotton withdrew his hands from his pockets and stood up; his eyes glowed. "Look here," he said doggedly, "if you want to put questions to me, I'll have to see a solicitor. I know your police methods and I know the law. I'm not going to have any case manufactured against me like that. So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Lever looked steadily into his eyes. His hand was still twitching at his beard.

"Maybe you'll be able to see a lawyer," he said. "Maybe not. I'm not sure that any

lawyer can help you. I'll take your word that you're not a pickpocket."

Some of Cotton's self-possession tumbled from him. His eyes narrowed. Something in Lever's words seemed to daunt him, as though they hid some veiled threat. Nevertheless his confusion was only momentary.

"That's all very well," he grumbled, with asperity. "You can't frighten me. I know my rights and I'm going to have 'em. See? I'll make a case of this. There's some people in the world that'll see a poor man gets justice done him."

"You're right," agreed Lever grimly. "There are people who'll see that you get justice done you."

Cotton missed or chose to ignore the retort. "I know you got no right to hold me here," he insisted. "You say I'm not wanted for pocket-picking. I suppose I can go now?"

"Not just yet. We want to talk to you for a little. Say, Cotton, you used to have a friend, didn't you—a chap named Yid Foster?"

It was the first time Larkett had spoken since he entered the room, and for all the mildness of his tone the question seemed to hit the detained man like a blow. His face went a shade paler, and it was noticeable that his hands opened and closed sharply.

"Eh? What?" he asked unsteadily. "What are you getting at?"

Lever threw a sharp glance at Larkett. The

eyes of the Secret Service man were fixed harshly on Cotton.

"You know the meaning of high treason? You know the penalty that can be exacted?"

"I—I don't know what you mean." Cotton was visibly alarmed and all his effrontery had vanished.

"Cut out the bluff," put in Lever harshly. "We know all about you."

"I give you my word, gentlemen—I'l swear——"

"Don't perjure yourself, my man," said Larkett levelly. "You know now that you're not under arrest for any tinkering criminal charge."

"It's up to you," added Lever. "Did you think you could shoot Brockford and get away with it? Now——"

He broke off short. Both he and Larkett were men who, by their profession, were used to the unexpected. But Cotton's move caught them off their guard. He had edged, during the conversation, imperceptibly nearer to one of the big windows which was open a few inches. A yell of warning escaped from the superintendent's lips, and both he and Larkett threw themselves forward.

They missed Cotton by an inch. He had pulled the window up and leapt full twenty feet to the pavement. The luck of desperation attended him. He staggered to his feet apparently unhurt, and slipped deftly from the grasp of the reserve constable who had dashed from the doorway.

A police whistle shrilled out as the man swerved round the corner, a dozen uniformed officers in pursuit. The Secret Service man walked back into the room.

"Who'd have thought of that?" said Lever, looking up from the window-sill.

"We overdid it," said the Secret Service man. "We carried the scare too far."

Both of them accepted the situation calmly. There was little use in excitement, and they could only have been a hopeless rear-guard in the pursuit.

"I never was much of a believer in anything approaching third-degree methods," agreed the superintendent. "He's the man right enough. I didn't think the little chap had it in him. He must have been scared right down to the core. They'll get him right enough," he added reassuringly. "He hadn't twenty yards' start."

"Let's hope so," said Larkett. Then he laughed. "What would happen to a pair of new constables who let a drunk and disorderly slip through their hands as easy as that?" he smiled.

CHAPTER XX

It was preposterous, but it was true. Unthinkable though it seemed, Cotton had made good his escape. With a start that was a matter of seconds and a dozen or more men at his heels, he had evaded the pursuit. He had taken a corner with the leading officers not eight yards away. Yet when they reached the corner he was out of sight—vanished utterly and inexplicably.

The pursuers had marked down the place at which he was last seen, and were searching back-gardens and areas with enthusiastic vigour, while a constable carried the news back to the station.

"It's too ridiculous," growled Lever in his beard. "I've known queer things happen in my time, but for a man to break out of a London police-station—and get away—beats me."

They were in the charge-room. A stout station sergeant blew his nose energetically on a coloured handkerchief. "They'll get him, sir," he said confidently. "Mr. Havel, our sub-divisional inspector, has taken every available man to draw a cordon."

"A cordon—pah," ejaculated Lever with pessimism. "He's probably outside it long ago.

Anyway, it will take all night to discover whether he's in or out."

The sergeant blew his nose again, but, being a diplomatic man, said nothing. Larkett whispered in the superintendent's ear.

"Yes, yes," agreed Lever. "Where's your telegraphist, sergeant? Oh, here he is. Now, my man, be as quick as you like. This is an all-station message."

The key rattled tempestuously as Lever, with swift precision, dictated a description of Cotton and instructions for his arrest—a formal and necessary precaution should he have escaped to any other part of London. Then another brief message went through to Winter at the Yard, and Lever was done.

"That's about all, I think," he said. "We can't do anything else except sit down and wait until they bring him in. Unless you prefer to go out and join in the hunt, that is."

The Secret Service man shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "It would be a waste of time and effort. If he's still there your police will find him—and we can't be any help. No, let's go back. If they catch him they can 'phone through to you at the Yard."

"What's the hurry? Half an hour here won't hurt us."

"I see little use in stopping, that's all. We could do nothing just now with Cotton even if he was caught. And with all respect to the excellent arrangements of the police, I have a hunch, as

they say in America, that he's given us the slip for the time being." He gaped. "I've been hard at it since this job started, and I'm going to seize the opportunity for a few hours' rest. That's all there is to it."

"I'm a good deal worried about Cotton," declared Lever. "My name's mud if he isn't the man we've been raising Cain to get."

Larkett stepped out of the station. "Worry won't help us," he said equably. "A sleep will do us both more good—if we can get it. We're better off than we were. We're not hunting so much for a needle in a haystack."

They got into the car and shot smoothly city-wards. They both relapsed into silence. Lever was annoyed with himself, for it is a first principle in police work that no person once in custody should be allowed to escape. He knew he could not be blamed. Yet he had his prestige in the service to think of. He had actually been in charge of Cotton during the interview. In the rigid code of the service he was the man responsible—he, the superintendent of the Special Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department, He would have felt the same had the man been only a minor offender. He wondered that Larkett could take it so placidly.

As they drew up in Great Derby Street he got to his feet. "Here we are," he said.

The Secret Service man made no answer. He was fast asleep. He awoke with a grunt when Lever shook him and descended unwillingly.

" By James, I'm tired ! " he yawned. " A few more days like this and I'll go to pieces. Hallo, there's a light in Winter's window ! He hasn't gone home yet. I wonder if there's any message from my club ? "

They met Winter in the corridor. His face was grave. " So he was the right man ? " he greeted them.

" Yes, and we let him slip through our fingers," answered Lever. " Don't rub it in."

" I'm not rubbing it in," said the other superintendent mildly. " Accidents will happen. I've routed out a dozen men of the department to get down to Highgate. Most of the rest are on special night duty. I've sent out for Maxwell. I was just trotting round to see if they've got him up yet."

" Where's Strang ? " said Larkett.

" Asleep on the couch in my room, or he was two minutes ago. I gave him a little bromide —oh, it's all right, Captain Larkett ; he's not butting in again on his own. I turned the key when I came out."

The three made their way to the room devoted to the use of the five chief inspectors of the Central Criminal Investigation Department. Winter gave a grunt of satisfaction as he saw the two men in waiting.

" So there you are, Jimmy," he said.

It was indeed Jimmy Maxwell, the man who had robbed Strang's safe for Brockford. He acknowledged the superintendent's greeting

genially. He was consumed with curiosity, which showed in his black eyes as he surveyed the trio. He knew that somehow he had become mixed up in big things—bigger than the mere bursting of a safe. The curious way in which he was being treated was evidence of that. Officially he was a free man ; unofficially Winter, who was nothing if not cautious, had handed him over to a trusted subordinate with instructions to eat, drink, and sleep with him, but not to let him out of sight without orders. He had always recognised the possibility of Jimmy being wanted again in a hurry. And Jimmy, who knew—there were those who had impressed it on his mind—what the result of his burglary would be if brought to the attention of a criminal court, had acquiesced, if not willingly at least tamely, to a course that promised his respite from gaol and kept him safely to Winter's hand.

"All right, Malley," said Winter to the detective in waiting with the burglar. "We'll tell you when we've finished." Malley disappeared, and the superintendent nodded amiably to Maxwell. "Well, Jimmy, I hope Malley's looking after you all right. Nothing to complain of, eh ? "

Maxwell's narrow eyebrows contracted and his dark eyes dwelt shiftily on the superintendent. What it was all about was a mystery to him, though he would not have been human if he had not had his surmises. The manner in which he was detained was sufficiently novel to impress him with its significance. In a wide experience

he had never known such a thing to happen. He had tried to draw out Malley, but that judicious officer knew nothing, and would have said nothing if he had; the results had been meagre. So Maxwell merely said that he was satisfied with his treatment and waited for things to develop. Winter handed him a cigar.

"Glad to hear that," he said. "What I sent for you now was to ask if you know a man named Cotton." He pushed a photograph into the burglar's hand. "That's the chap."

Maxwell passed the piece of pasteboard back. He was wondering whether it was worth while to lie or not. A glance at Winter's face decided him that it was not.

"Yes, guv'nor, I know him," he admitted.

"Who is he? What do you know about him?"

Jimmy thrust two thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and his eyes narrowed. He shot a big puff of smoke out of the cigar Winter had given him. "He's a crook, right enough, Mr. Winter. I've never worked with him, so I don't know much about him. But I guess he knows enough to carry an umbrella when it's wet."

Winter's gaze wandered to a bill stuck on the wall:

METROPOLITAN POLICE

£1000 REWARD

He brought himself back abruptly and, removing his pince-nez, began to polish them.

"Look here, Jimmy," he said quietly. "You're afraid of giving away more than you think we want." Jimmy shook his head with a wan, deprecating smile. "Oh, come off it. If he isn't a pal of yours there's no reason why you shouldn't talk. And if anything comes of it, it will be worth a hundred pounds to you—see?"

A tinge of colour came into the burglar's pale face. The proverb that insists there is honour among thieves is a lie anyone with experience of criminals can testify. If there were honour among thieves every police force in the world might be disbanded to-morrow. And it has to be a very successful criminal who can afford to despise a hundred pounds in cash—which is a very different thing from a hundred pounds' worth of loot.

Maxwell wanted that hundred pounds—wanted it very badly. He had no particular predilection towards Cotton and no fear of him. For a hundred pounds he would have betrayed his most intimate friend.

"I'll do all I can, chief. Cotton had a hand in that post-office business at Norwood. He and Yid Foster pulled that off together."

Winter remembered the case. It had occurred at a sub-post-office. The solitary attendant had been stunned by two men who had entered before eight o'clock and left bound and gagged while the place was rifled.

"Did they now!" he remarked, with grim

interest. "So Cotton's a pal of Foster's, is he? Tell us some more, Jimmy."

Maxwell bent his brows and wrestled with his recollection. Finally he shook his head. "I can't remember anything just now, guv'nor, but if you would let me have the reins for a bit——"

"No go, Jimmy," retorted Winter. "We want you handy for a while. Do you know where Cotton hangs out?"

"No, I don't. If you want Foster you'll most likely get him at the Six Owls——"

"In Whitechapel Road? I know. Here's another thing. Has Cotton got a girl?"

"There's a kid he's sweet on on the halls—Vivienne Greyden. I don't know whether she's working now or whether she's in London. She's billed as a comedienne."

Winter stood up. "That's all, I think, gentlemen. Thanks very much, Jimmy. If I find out what you've told me is worth a hundred you can stand on me. Good-night—Malley!"

The last word was roared out as an indication to the detective-inspector that the interview was at an end.

Larkett followed the two detectives back along the corridor to Winter's room. The superintendent was chuckling to himself. There is always a friendly rivalry between the two chief branches of the Criminal Investigation Department when they chance to be working in association on a particular case, and Winter was not

sorry to have scored a little at the moment when both his colleagues and the Secret Service man had had an important capture fall through.

A messenger held up the superintendent for a second. "Beg your pardon, sir. The gentleman in your room, he's been kicking and knocking at the door for the last ten minutes. I didn't like to disturb you, sir, knowing you were busy——"

"Strang?" ejaculated Larkett.

"Yes," said Winter. "I quite forgot him. Come on."

He put the key in the lock and pushed the door open, nearly knocking over the young airman, who, flushed and angry, stood on the other side.

"This is going too far," he began angrily.

"I apologise, Mr. Strang," said Winter suavely. "I clean forgot you were in my room, and it's become a matter of habit for me to lock the door when I go out. I *am* sorry."

"Should think so," grumbled Strang unappeased. "First you arrest me and drag me through the streets, and then you lock me up. Larkett, they've been ringing up from your club. Some newspaper-seller has delivered a letter or something there that he picked up in the street and demanded a sovereign. They wanted to know if it was all right. I told 'em it was, and asked them to send the letter round here. It may be something about Betty."

His anger had evaporated in excitement as he gripped the Secret Service man's arm. Larkett no longer appeared sleepy. "Quite right, old

chap," he agreed. "Would you mind sending down to see if anything's come, Mr. Winter? We'll see if it's worth the money."

A quarter of an hour later Larkett had come emphatically to the opinion that it was worth the money. He had jealously deciphered Lady Malchester's shorthand notes himself, and not even to the detectives did he indicate from whom his information came.

"You'll want to handle this end yourself?" queried Lever. "You've got the number of the cab. The Public Carriage Office will tell you who it belongs to, and it'll be easy to find the driver then. He'll tell you where he took Shaugnessy."

"Thanks, we'll divide forces then. You'll stick with me, Jack, and you and Winter, I suppose, will try to get hold of Miss Vivienne Greyden."

"That's exactly the idea," agreed Winter.

CHAPTER XXI

SHAUGNESSY feared he had made a mistake, and he chewed a cigar viciously over the reflection. It was one thing to hold Betty Carstairs in order to force Strang's hand; it was quite another to have to look after Lady Malchester. Betty had been necessary to his plans. Lady Malchester was decidedly unnecessary.

A solitary dinner—as good as could be got at the obscure restaurant circumstances forced him to patronise—had caused him to modify in some degree his opinion of Lady Malchester's nerve and his own cleverness. Possibly his digestion was a little out of working order. His ruminations were certainly uneasy. When he had paid his second visit to St. Thomas's Hospital he had been on his guard against any of the more obvious measures that might be used against him, and had made preparations to confound them. Even if he had been arrested—though that was unlikely—he could still have had the secret of Betty's whereabouts and might have used her as a sort of hostage. Except by his own foolishness, he told himself, no one would ever have known her whereabouts till he chose to reveal it. But then he had not reckoned on

a woman—least of all such a woman as he was beginning to conceive Lady Malchester to be.

Until she had fastened to him there had been nothing which the investigators might seize upon as a clue. It was even a possibility that Betty's disappearance was unknown. But Larkett was behind Lady Malchester—he had no illusions about that—and now the hunt would be up with a vengeance.

"I ought to have dumped her down in a shop or somewhere when she fainted," he reflected. "It was a fool thing to carry her away—*there*, anyhow. She couldn't have done very much harm at that stage."

But the thing was done. He remembered the story of the man who held the tiger's tail and was uncertain whether to keep hold or let go.

"Well, I can't let go now," he decided aloud "I'll see it through."

He ordered a liqueur on the strength of his resolution and sipped it slowly while he reflected. He was in the mood for entertainment, and though he realised the danger of being about in public he decided to risk a music-hall. He strolled out, the cigar still between his teeth, and a casual observer might have put him down as a man at ease with all the world.

He chose the Regal, and sat in quiet content for a little. The curtain had dropped on the fourth turn when a programme-seller edged her way along towards him. "Are you Mr. Shaugnessy, sir?" she asked.

"That's my name," he admitted.

"There's a gentleman up in the saloon would like to speak to you—a friend of yours."

"A friend of mine. Didn't he give a name?"

"No, sir. He said he was a friend of yours." She edged backward.

The big man rose with placid heaviness, but he was more than a little startled. A half-thought of a quick and unostentatious exit from the theatre was stifled as soon as it had arisen. If the summons was from those engaged against him, he was sure that retreat would be cut off. He pushed his way out after the girl.

There was no one he recognised as he parted the heavy plush curtains leading into the gilded saloon. An undergrown man who was drinking at the bar set down his glass and came forward.

"How do you do, Mr. Shaugnessy?" he asked, and extended a hand. "I took the liberty of sending for you."

The spy lounged up to the bar and leaned one elbow on it. He regarded the other coolly, without a trace of recognition in his face. Cotton met his gaze unabashed.

"So it was you sent for me—was it?" demanded the Irishman. "Well, I'm here. What might you be wanting?—though I don't know you from Adam."

Cotton's eyelid opened and closed sharply. "Hardly likely you'd remember me, Shaugnessy," he said, dropping the prefix deliberately. "We've met before, though you've probably forgotten all

about it. Have a drink? I mustn't buy you one, but we can talk more sociable like over a glass."

With the memory of Lady Malchester in his mind, Shaugnessy was well on his guard. The free and easy manner of the stranger might be a genuine though clumsy attempt at good fellowship. On the other hand, it might not.

He relieved the bar of his weight, and with studied gravity looked the other up and down as though inspecting some new species of animal.

"There's a Mr. in front of my name, Mr. Cotton," he said. "I don't know you, and I won't have a drink, but if you'll tell me what your business is I'll perhaps be able to get back and see the show for which I've paid."

"All right, *mister*," said Cotton. "No harm meant. Sorry I interrupted you. If you don't want to talk business, I reckon I can sell my goods somewhere else."

Shaugnessy had half turned. He wheeled back sharply. "What's that?"

"Oh, don't you worry, old sport. You go back and look at the show." It was clear that Cotton had been drinking.

"What business?" The Irishman's suspicions were still tense, but there was the chance that the little man might be genuine.

Cotton again dropped one white eyelid mysteriously and confidentially. "I'll tell you," he said. "But anyone might come in here.

The tea-room's the place. That'll be deserted until the interval."

Shaugnessy permitted himself to be led to a tea-room curtained off from the saloon and dimly lit by rose-shaded electric lights. Cotton subsided into a chair, but the fat man remained standing.

"You're Patrick Shaugnessy, aren't you?" Cotton waited, a grin on his face. The Irishman made no answer, and his companion leaned forward as his voice dropped to a whisper. "You're Patrick Shaugnessy," he repeated. "I reckon now the goods I've got ought to interest you. You're a German spy."

Still by no means sure of his man, Shaugnessy knew the right thing to do. His heavy fist doubled, and his face blazed in righteous anger. "You're a liar!" he retorted fiercely.

"'Sh! 'Sh!" Cotton put out a restraining hand and glanced round shiftily to see that the outburst had not attracted attention. "No good getting upset. I know you. I noticed you almost directly I got in the theatre, and I felt my luck was in. I've been wanting you badly."

"Who told you I was—that?" asked Shaugnessy.

"Oh, I had met you before the war. I don't forget faces, and anyway you're the kind of man one remembers. I got some letters for a friend of yours—Portsmouth it was."

Shaugnessy took a closer look at him. The episode was one in which Cotton had played quite

a minor part, and it had happened several years before. The man, he reflected, might now very well be in the pay of the British Secret Service. With his suspicions still not entirely appeased, Shaugnessy nodded. In any event, he might as well hear what the man had to say.

"Yes. I think I remember something of the kind," he said, with a little less harshness in his manner. "Go on. What do you want to say?"

"That's more sensible," said Cotton amiably. "I'll begin at the beginning, Mr. Shaugnessy. Some hours—it may have been some days ago—a man got some copies of certain plans from a flat in Westminster. Those plans came into my hands. I knew they would interest you, and I started out to look for you. I couldn't seem to get an end anyhow, and then to-day I was pulled by some Scotland Yard people and taken to Highgate Police Station."

"Ah!" Shaugnessy sat down. "What were you taken there for?"

"They wouldn't say much at first. Then some of 'em kind of made out that I was wanted for pocket-picking. Me!" A touch of indignation crept into Cotton's voice. "I've never picked a pocket in my life. That was only a stall off. They must have got wind somehow that I'd got something they wanted."

The Irishman stirred. "You think they had a line on you for—eh?"

Cotton was able to fill in the hiatus. "Yep," he grinned. "Sure of it. Well, to-night in

comes two men, and I'm turned into a recreation-room for them to pump me. It wasn't very long before I tumbled that they were big-wigs from the Yard or somewhere, but I was too wide for them. They didn't get any change out of Reg Cotton."

"You're no mug," said Shaugnessy encouragingly.

"Not by a jugful. I saw the red light all right through. I knew my only chance was to make a get-a-way and to make it quick. So I took a chance and jumped for it——"

"Jumped?"

"Yes, jumped from a first-floor window, and luckily landed right side up. Phew!" Cotton passed a hand across his forehead. "I didn't wait to see, but I could hear policemen being erupted from that station like bees out of an overturned hive. They gave me a pretty close call, too, but I diddled them." He nodded his head with a self-satisfied jerk. "Yes, I diddled 'em. You see, when I turned a corner there was a kiddie standing in an open doorway. I caught him up, put my hand over his mouth, and got inside—heard 'em go by—and then tied him snug and neat—and got over a back wall and walked to a Tube station. Luckily, there wasn't anyone else in the house."

Shaugnessy rubbed his chin with a podgy hand. Cotton had cleared up several points that had puzzled him in regard to the activity of Larkett and his friends. It was clear that other plans

than those in Strang's possession were about. It touched his self-conceit that until this moment he had never heard of them. Still, he was not sure of Cotton. This might all be an elaborate ruse to foist on Germany some rubbish that would lead her designers astray on the main points of the S. and B. aeroplanes. There was a precedent. He remembered that the plans of the original Dreadnought which some of his colleagues had been permitted to acquire years before had been so fallacious that Germany had wasted many millions before she discovered that perfidious England had duped her.

"That would make a good story for the moving pictures," he said.

"You don't believe me?" demanded Cotton.

"Oh yes, I believe you. But you haven't told me how you got those plans in the first place."

"No. Nor likely to." Cotton's voice was firm. "The only thing that matters to you is that I've got 'em—see? You name the price, and we'll see if we can come to terms."

Dozens of questions passed to Shaugnessy's lips. But he recognised the futility of cross-examination. He only put one.

"You escaped from the police-station and yet you've come here to a public place of entertainment," he said.

Cotton looked a little shamefaced. "Yes—they won't be looking for me in this part of London. You see—there's a kid—a girl—in the show—but that doesn't matter."

"I see." Shaugnessy pursed his lips. "When can you show me these things?"

Cotton rumbled with satirical laughter. "What do you take me for? When we've fixed prices 'll be soon enough to talk of that."

"I don't buy a pig in a poke. I'm not at all sure that I want those things or that they'll be any good when I get 'em. I'll strain a point for once. What shall we say—two hundred and fifty?"

This time Cotton did not laugh. He shrugged his shoulders scornfully. "You're a nib, Shaugnessy," he said. "You're It. You're the limit. Why, I came to you because you paid high. Two hundred and fifty!" He snorted contemptuously. "Why don't you offer me a packet of cigarettes?"

"Well, I'm not sure that they're worth more," said the Irishman serenely. "Where are they?"

The other eyed him cunningly. "They're safe enough, old man," he retorted. "I can put my hands on them at the proper time. See here. You can't bluff me. I want ten thousand here in my hand"—he held out his fist as though he expected the Irishman to count the money into it—"before you get your eyes on those papers. There's folk who will give me as much," he added ominously.

"You talk pretty loud for a man whom the police are looking for," said Shaugnessy, with a glance over his shoulder. "Well, I think I'll get back and see the show."

Cotton's jaw dropped as the Irishman rose with the air of one to whom a proposal too preposterous to be discussed had been broached. Somehow Shaugnessy had made him lose confidence in himself.

In point of fact the Irishman would have been glad to acquire the plans at ten thousand pounds or even at ten times that sum. But recent events had made the lavish purse which had been at his disposal an uncertain quantity. One cannot carry about an unlimited supply of money, and now that he was unmasked Shaugnessy knew that Larkett would have taken measures to cut him off from his supplies.

"Here," remonstrated Cotton, "don't be too hasty. Can't we come to some arrangement?"

The signs of weakening were apparent. Shaugnessy shook his head. "Not on those terms," he said firmly.

"Well, sit down again. What will you give?"

"Two hundred and fifty pounds."

"Right you are, Shaugnessy. You'll regret this. I'll see you where steel melts before I try to do you a turn again." He glowered fiercely at the imperturbable Irishman.

"Quite finished?" asked Shaugnessy.

Cotton breathed hardly, but said nothing.

"Because now I'll tell you what I will do. You come with me to get those papers. If, when I look at them, I find they're worth it I'll pay you two thousand—not a farthing more. You went

to one extreme and I went to the other just now. Now you've got a reasonable proposal and it's my last word."

Cotton had quietened down a little. He seemed to consider. "It's a Jew's bargain, if you ask me," he said at last. "I believe you'd pay a lot more. However, it's a bet. But you don't come with me—not much—you go and get the money, and I'll get the papers, and we'll meet at ——" —he named a public-house near the Strand—"in two hours' time. Will that do?"

"That will suit me," said Shaugnessy indifferently.

CHAPTER XXII

Some phases of detective work are uncommonly simple—when one knows how. The hint of Jimmy Maxwell and a study of the stage papers had brought both Winter and Lever to the stage door of the Regal Theatre in search of Cotton's inamorata. A word to the manager had procured their admission to the mysterious precincts within.

To them in a dressing-room came a short-skirted, yellow-haired goddess with a Cockney accent and a fund of prattle. She had buried her youth beneath thick rouge, and great lines of grease paint had been daubed under her eyes. At close quarters, without the limelight, stage make-up is not a lovely thing.

Winter gravely introduced himself as Mr. Brooke, and Lever as Mr. Sudeley. "Friends of Mr. Cotton, you know. He asked us to come and see your show to-night—said your number was a winner."

The lady flashed her teeth in approved picture-postcard manner. Winter went on:

"We expected to meet him in front of the house. The fact is, we had a bit of business on which ought to have been settled long ago.

We thought a little supper-party afterwards—if you'd honour us. It's a case of getting hold of him first, though. He doesn't seem to have turned up. So we thought we'd come round and see if you could tell us where we're likely to find him. Then we could bring him along."

Even a three years' experience of the London and provincial music-hall stage had failed to make the lady as worldly-wise as might be expected. Winter's manner was convincing and plausible. That two prosperous, middle-aged, genial men should come to her asking about her "boy" did not strike her as at all strange. Chance had backed up the detective's attempt to get the man's address out of her and to endorse his story that they had come to the hall to meet Cotton.

"That's funny," she said. "I know he's here, 'cos I had a note saying he'd be round at the stage door to meet me when my turn is over. One of the attendants from the front of the house brought it."

Lever frowned at his companion. "We must have missed him somehow!" he exclaimed, as one upon whom a new light had broken.

"What part of the house did y' look in?" asked the girl.

"The stalls," answered Winter promptly.

"Ah, he never goes in the stalls. You ought to have gone up to one of the circles. Perhaps"—with a gleam of intuition—"he was in one of the saloons."

"Well, we'll go and have another look round,

my dear," said Winter. "Now we know he's here we'll find him. And you won't forget the supper engagement, will you?" He winked at her. "I wish I were Cotton."

"G'wan with you!" she giggled, and gave him a push. "You wicked old man!"

"Not so old, either," retorted Winter, and edged his way out after Lever.

The other superintendent regarded him in some disapproval as they emerged on to the pavement. "You flirtatious old villain!" he growled. "That's how you get results, is it? She'd have kissed you in another second or two."

Winter chuckled. "I believe you, my lad. Didn't you notice me scurry out? We'll now go and try to get a line on my hated rival. Come on."

So it was that Cotton found what other and wiser men have discovered—that it does not pay to mix sentiment with business. The impulse of recklessness that had effected his escape, and brought him to the Regal, also brought about his recapture. He gave a swift glance to right and left as he descended the wide flight of steps out of the brightly lighted theatre. Lever had his back turned, his coat collar well turned up, and was apparently lost in contemplation of the opposite side of the road. A taxi-cab was drawn up directly opposite to the entrance of the theatre. Winter was studying a playbill, but his eyes ran sidelong to his quarry.

Cotton, all unawares of the honour that was

about to be done him,—for it is rarely that either of the superintendents of the C.I.D. effects arrests personally,—turned to the left as he reached the pavement. He moved towards where Winter was still intensely interested in the playbill.

Not until he was a yard away did the detective move, though Lever was now walking diagonally behind Cotton a dozen paces away. Then things happened.

Winter scarcely seemed to move, yet a hand gripped Cotton's wrist with vice-like tightness, so that his tigerish spring to get away jarred every muscle in his body.

"Your name's Cotton. I want you," said the detective quietly.

An oath slipped from the man's lips. In the few hours that had elapsed since he left Highgate he had taken one precaution. Winter had seized his left arm. His right flickered to his jacket pocket, but before it could be withdrawn Lever had reached him.

Cotton, although lacking in size, had a wild-cat strength, and though either of the well-trained detectives would have been a match for him individually, it needed all their physical adroitness to achieve an arrest without awakening the unwelcome interest of a crowd. It is seldom that men of the C.I.D. make a spectacular arrest. A drunken man haled to a police-station by a constable gives a more dramatic thrill to the onlookers than a murderer captured after a world-chase.

Passers-by near the Regal Theatre saw a momentary scuffle between three men. Save for the words uttered by Winter and the one ejaculation by Cotton the struggle was in silence. Only the taxi-cab driver looking on had a guess as to what was happening—and he had had his instructions to drive to Vine Street directly the man was in the cab.

Within a minute Cotton was lifted bodily into the cab, which slid forward on the instant. Winter now was sitting on Cotton's knees holding his wrists with both hands. It takes two men to get handcuffs on an unwilling prisoner. At last Lever got the shining circlets over the man's wrists. Winter shifted his weight and slipped one arm through Cotton's.

"Now we can be comfortable," he said. "You've had a nice little outing, Mr. Cotton."

For the moment Cotton was too exhausted to reply. The perspiration stood out thickly on his face and his breath came and went in quick gasps. Lever handled the bulldog revolver he had taken at the first of the struggle.

"A good job for you you didn't have a chance to use this," he remarked.

"I'll do you yet," growled Cotton. "You see."

Illogically enough, he felt himself an ill-used man, and his indignation burned high. He was proud of his exploit in escaping from the police-station, and it seemed to him that fate had treated him harshly in thus curtailing his spell of

liberty. Neither of the detectives commented on the threat. They were used to them. They knew such threats usually came from an exuberance of anger, and that there was rarely weight behind them.

It was in the small detention-room at Vine Street, an apartment sufficiently furnished to escape the rigour of a cell, but with all the security of a cell, including a barred window, that he became more subdued.

"Who put you up to this?" he asked. An idea came to him—a suspicion he would have seen to be impossible as well as improbable in saner moments. "There was no one who knew I was at the Regal except the kid and Shaug——" He stopped suddenly.

"And Shaugnessy, you were about to say," observed Winter blandly. And then significantly, "Mr. Shaugnessy is a friend of ours."

He had seen Cotton's suspicion, and was swift to fan it. When thieves fall out detectives find their work made easy. "The cur!" burst out Cotton. "The oily sneak! I suppose he 'phoned you and then held me in talk." He lifted his manacled hands high above his head and brought them down with a crash on the table. "By heavens, if I ever get a chance at the——" He became incoherent.

"So Shaugnessy was there, was he?" asked Lever. There was a chagrin in his voice he could not keep out. It came bitterly to both Winter and himself that they had missed a chance of a

bigger coup of bagging their game with both barrels.

Their chief consolation was that, of the two, they had got the man they regarded as most important. They both believed he had the plans; they both believed he was the man who had shot Brockford.

"Don't try that old swank on me," said Cotton bitterly. "You know well enough. I'll get him, if it's in ten years' time."

"Half a moment," said Winter, and disappeared. When he returned, five men, each furnished with an adequate description of Shaugnessy, were on their way to the Regal Theatre.

"Now, Cotton," said Lever briskly, "let's get down to it. We want those plans."

Cotton had been making use of the opportunity afforded by Winter's absence to consider several matters. He had come to the agreeable conclusion that on the whole matters might be worse. He assumed a look of astonishment, though in his leaden eyes there lingered a curious light.

"Plans?" he exclaimed. "What plans?"

Lever shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Come, my man, it's no good beating about the bush. We know you've got those documents, and we're going to have 'em."

"Just you keep on wanting," retorted Cotton insolently.

Winter touched a bell used to communicate

with the inspectors' room, and a uniformed inspector thrust his head in.

"Give us a second," said Winter. "We're going to search this man here, and we want you to take a list."

It was a search by experts—not by any means the perfunctory searching for dangerous weapons which it is usual for a prisoner to undergo, but a determined, thorough examination from which nothing could escape. From the lining of his cap to the soles of his boots, every article of clothing in which a paper could be concealed was examined. Cotton grinned ruefully as Lever slit up a seam of his jacket with a penknife.

"Want to make a scarecrow of me?" he said. "You're going to a lot of trouble for nothing."

"We'll see," answered Lever grimly.

But their efforts resulted in nothing. Half an hour had been wasted. The inspector went away, and Cotton observed the discomfiture of the detectives with a kind of saturnine glee.

"Satisfied now?" he asked.

"Well, I guess you'll have to be put where you'll be safe now," said Lever.

"What for?" There was anxiety in Cotton's voice.

"Oh, there's plenty against you," answered Winter. "We won't let a little thing like that worry us any. The very best you can hope for is a charge of attempted murder."

He spoke gravely, and Cotton blanched per-

ceptibly. But in spite of his whitened cheeks he tried to carry the matter off jauntily.

"No charge under the Defence of the Realm Act?" he said.

Winter leaned across the table. "We're saving that," he replied. "It's clean against our duty, but if you tell us where those plans are, we'll undertake to drop that."

"What do you take me for?" asked Cotton. "I know how badly you want those plans. Here's my terms. Drop everything you've got against me and give me a thousand quid to get out of the country with, and you shall have 'em."

There was little of laughter in either of the detectives, but both grinned as though some apt joke had been made. They moved simultaneously to the door. Lever touched the bell. He jerked his head towards the prisoner as it was answered.

"Take this man to the cells," he said. "Goodnight, Cotton."

CHAPTER XXIII

One fact upon which Winter had not reckoned interfered with the steps he had taken to pick up Shaugnessy's trail. He had not guessed that the Irishman knew of the fate that had befallen Cotton.

For the Irishman had not been content merely to accept the word of the lesser scoundrel. He knew that accidents would happen. Having learned with certainty that copies of the plans existed, he had no mind to let the other out of his sight until they had been handed over to him.

Thus it was that he had lounged discreetly after Cotton when he left the saloon of the Regal Theatre and, his portly form masked by a couple of attendants in the vestibule, his little keen eyes observed the arrest outside. No detail escaped his attention, and he puckered his thick lips in an inaudible whistle.

He reflected, in his own cynical way, that there was no greater fool than a fool with brains. Cotton's cleverness had carried him to a point—and to disaster. Shaugnessy did not waste his sympathy. He was more concerned with the result the taking of Cotton would have on himself and his own schemes.

He realised how narrow had been his own escape. Neither Larkett nor the police would have stayed their hands at Cotton alone—if they had known. They were clever—he admitted it to himself. He more than suspected that in Cotton they had got the man who had shot Brockford. But if they thought he was going to sit down and wait till the relentless hunt closed in, they were mistaken.

There could be no doubt that the first step was to get clear of the music-hall. Without haste he walked into the street and set his face toward the Strand, his brain twisting the new position this way and that. But he never lost sight of his main idea—to achieve possession of the plans by any means which he could encompass.

The success that had seemed within his grasp had been shattered by the timely rearrest of Cotton. Nevertheless, in some degree he realised that he was further advanced. Not only were the plans in Strang's possession, but copies had reached the hands of Cotton. These latter would almost certainly be easier to reach, and it should not be beyond the intelligence of an acute man to discover where they had been hidden. The chief difficulty was that the police and Larkett would be on the same quest. He must be first. Yet even if he failed, Betty Carstairs still remained, and it was still on the cards that Strang would surrender to save her.

Shaugnessy turned into a telegraph office, and

for ten minutes talked earnestly into a telephone. Then he sent a wire, and, satisfied that he had done all that thought could devise for the moment, called a taxi-cab. With his mind on possible shadowers he pursued a devious route.

In New Oxford Street he at last dismissed it. His way led through the street of tall houses which had once impressed Betty. He was apparently a casual stroller, but the beady eyes took in every detail of the thoroughfare, and every one of the rare wayfarers met the sharp scrutiny. Finally his eyes dwelt on the big house in which he knew Mme Levitska was installed. There was not a glimmer of light anywhere.

He wheeled on his heel with satisfaction. Mme Levitska had obeyed orders, and he liked prompt obedience. That end of his scheme could not go awry.

A cry from across the road startled him. Two men had neared him, and it was as one of them sprang that an astonished pedestrian shouted a warning. But it came too late. A hand fastened fiercely on the lapel of his coat, and he was hurled backwards against the area railings with a force that bruised him from head to heel.

His assailant's grip shifted to his throat, and for all his weight he was shaken savagely as a terrier shakes a rat. A voice, hoarse and unnatural with passion, rang in his ears.

"Where is she, you dog? Tell me. By God, I'll kill you if you don't answer."

The rage-distorted face of Jack Strang was

within six inches of his own. Blinded and half-choked in that throttling hold, he struggled vainly to release himself.

His blows—and he was a powerful man—had no more effect upon his antagonist than if they had been the playful caress of a kitten.

For all his great bulk he was lifted bodily for an instant and battered again against the railings.

" Speak, you hound ! " hissed Strang, and the street swam before Shaugnessy's eyes in a swirl of red.

A quieter voice interposed, and other hands loosened the stifling fingers.

" How can he answer while you're strangling him ? Don't make a scene, Jack. Quiet yourself. You're behaving yourself like a condemned fool. You're only doing harm by this exhibition. Let go, I tell you."

It was Larkett who interfered. Reluctantly Strang released the Irishman, whose face had gone a rich scarlet, and who now leaned against the fence gasping horribly. A little knot of spectators had gathered, and on the outskirts of the group a constable walked quickly.

" Let him tell us where she is," blazed Strang. The sight of the spy seemed to have again broken the bonds of his self-control.

He was reckless of everything, impatient of Larkett's careful, calculating coolness, and maddened to a blind frenzy by sight of the man who had ventured to use Betty Carstairs as a cat's-paw in his game of intrigue.

The delay caused by the necessity of finding the cabman who had driven Lady Malchester and Shaugnessy from St. Thomas's Hospital had resulted in bringing Larkett and Strang into the street a few minutes after the Irishman. The encounter had been quite unexpected. Larkett had anticipated the possibility of Shaugnessy being in the house—though he had not deemed even that probable—but that Strang and the spy should be brought together in a public thoroughfare had not occurred to him. Indeed, if he had thought it likely, he would have left his friend at Scotland Yard rather than run any risk of having events forced by the simmering anger and anxiety of the young airman.

"Will you keep quiet, Strang?" he insisted peremptorily. The policeman had elbowed his way forward. "It's all right, officer. There's been a little mistake. It's all over. Come on, Strang. Come, Shaugnessy."

Shaugnessy's readiness was coming back to him, though he was still giddy and dazed. He was inclined to resent the abrupt order of the Secret Service man, and there was possibly something of fear in his mind. But Larkett found an unexpected ally in the policeman, who had put his own construction on the incident.

"You'd better do as the gentleman tells you," he said sternly. He's giving you good advice. Now, go along home with him, there's good chaps."

"Do you think I'm drunk?" demanded Strang fiercely.

" Never mind what I think," retorted the constable. " If you're sensible you'll go along." He emphasised his comment with a slight push.

" Come on, Jack, don't be a fool," repeated Larkett. He had already linked one arm with Shaugnessy, and now caught Strang with the other. His stronger personality triumphed. The trio moved forward, and the little crowd, balked in its expectation of a drunken street broil, dispersed with disappointment.

Larkett was angry. Save that his hold on Shaugnessy never relaxed, he ignored the spy for the moment.

" Of all the raging, tearing madmen I ever had the ill-fortune to be associated with, you're the worst, Jack. No, don't interrupt. I want to tell you what I think of you while you cool down."

His lecture lacked nothing in emphasis as he painted the evils of giving way to impulse. Strang listened sullenly. Presently the spy broke in. He had come to accept the situation with all his habitual coolness.

" I hope you will join me in your remarks, Captain Larkett," he said suavely. " There is, as you truly say, little sense in losing one's balance. Mr. Strang and I may now cry quits on physical violence." His voice took on a slight change. " Apart from that, I think some explanation is owing me."

Captain Larkett's arms pressed a bit more tightly on each man. " Do you really think an

explanation is necessary?" he asked. "I don't underrate your intelligence."

His voice was as level as Shaugnessy's, and his manner even more urbane. Strang, however, was in no mood for the courtesies of warfare. He smothered the spy's reply.

"We're only wasting time in being civil to this scoundrel, Larkett. Let's hand him over to the police and search the house."

"Lady Malchester!" thought Shaugnessy. He began to perceive that the information upon which the two were acting was extensive. He had never thought for a moment that their presence in that thoroughfare was due to chance. He congratulated himself mentally that the telephone call he had made had been in the nick of time.

"I wish you would leave this to me, Jack," said Larkett, his serenity again ruffled. "Now, Mr. Shaugnessy, I don't need to tell you that circumstances have changed since we last met. Will you take us to Miss Carstairs? Let us turn back."

They had passed Mme Levitska's house. Now, as they wheeled under a lamp-post to return, Shaugnessy's moon-like face was revealed. He smiled deprecatingly.

"My dear Captain Larkett, you would have saved the three of us an unpleasant episode and our friend Strang some anxiety if you had stayed at home. I think it probable that Miss Carstairs is already at Connaught Square. At any rate she is no longer enjoying my hospitality."

Larkett stopped dead, and the others came to a halt perforce. A strained "What?" came from Strang's lips.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Larkett. "Has Lady—has Miss Carstairs escaped?"

"She's gone," said Shaugnessy shortly. "I misjudged the capacity of your friends and yourself, Captain Larkett. I admit it freely. I placed her with a woman I thought I could trust——"

"Mme Levitska?" interrupted Larkett.

"Exactly. You got her name from—well, I suppose you have your own method. Yes, I trusted her. To-night I find the house empty. I was just coming away when Mr. Strang reintroduced himself to me so forcibly. I assume that her persuasions have proved too much for Madame."

A quick revulsion of feeling came over Strang. Almost he could have shaken Shaugnessy's hand. Not so Larkett. His under lip jutted out. He was going to take nothing for granted, especially on a statement of the spy's.

"We'll hope so," he said dryly. "Meanwhile we'll take a look at this house. You've got a key, I suppose?"

"Oh yes. I'm quite willing to let you see for yourselves."

They pushed on and entered the house. Larkett struck a match as the door clanged behind them, and finding an electric-light switch, turned it on. The place had that queer indefinable atmosphere of desertion that overtakes even newly emptied houses.

"Have you got your pistol, Jack?" whispered Larkett.

Strang gave a grim nod of assent and produced the weapon.

"Very well." He released his arm from the Irishman and opened a door. "This should be the drawing-room, I think," he said, switching on the light. "I'll trouble you to wait here, Mr. Shaugnessy. Jack, you hang on and keep an eye on him. I recommend you to shoot if he gets restive. Don't let him play any tricks. I'll search the place."

"Trust me," said Strang.

Shaugnessy smiled and dropped casually into an arm-chair.

"I assure you you're merely wasting your time," he declared smoothly. "However, if it pleases you —I am in your hands. I will try to avoid giving Mr. Strang any cause to get reckless with his gun."

"I should if I were you," warned Strang, and drawing a chair up directly opposite the Irishman he sat down, the hand with the pistol in it resting on his knee.

Larkett passed out. The other two remained in grim silence, though a contemptuous smile flickered about the Irishman's countenance as he noticed that every time he shifted his position Strang brought his weapon to a level.

It was half an hour before the Secret Service man returned. He shook his head as he entered the room.

"The place is deserted," he said.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE cheerful confidence of Lady Malchester had put new heart into Betty. Not only was the intolerable loneliness broken—and now, for the first time, she realised how long the hours had been—but the dreads that had assailed her had been dissipated under the sprightly optimism of Larkett's emissary.

Her natural spirits had returned to her, but inwardly she reproached herself that the condition of her stepfather did not weigh more heavily upon her. Somehow, since the first revelation of his treachery towards Jack Strang, she had looked on him with different, more critical eyes. The shock caused by the news of the attack on him had brought back some of her old feeling, but that had vanished. If she did not think of him with bitterness she was almost apathetic. A door had been shut between them.

Some part of her story she had told Lady Malchester, and that astute lady was able to fill in many of the gaps. It may have been the circumstances that had thrown them together, more probably it was certain points of contact between their temperaments that had made

them take to each other. In less than an hour they were calling each other by their Christian names.

Dinner, daintily selected, was brought in to them by Mme Levitska, and they ate healthily. Lady Malchester's sharp ears gathered that the trays were brought to the doorway by someone else, but it was only Madame who entered.

"It's evident we're not intended for starvation," she said. "I wish I had Madame's cook. Here's a Pêche Melba, by all the gods! Eat, Betty, eat! When you reach my age you'll realise that it is unwise to meet a stress hungry. Who knows when or if we shall have a meal again?"

Betty dimpled. "Let's hope our next one will be somewhere else."

"I'll drink to that," said Lady Malchester. She made a wry face. "The only fault I have to find with this meal is that the wine is not in keeping—claret, and cheap claret at that."

Mme Levitska came into the room with her noiseless, gliding step and caught the last remark. "I am sorry you do not approve of the wine," she said, with a sour smile.

Lady Malchester cocked her head sideways and held her glass poised in her hand. "Don't apologise, I beg," she said sweetly.

"I am having a bedroom prepared for you," went on Mme Levitska. "You will not object to sharing a room?"

She went out without waiting for an answer.

Lady Malchester put one slim finger by the side of her nose and gently rubbed it. "I think our dear gaoler wanted to hear what we were talking about," she said. "Did you notice how she stole in without warning? There was no need for her to tell us we should have to sleep here. Artful, artful!" She shook a reproving head. "At any rate, it goes to prove there are no spy-holes in this room. We can talk freely, Betty."

"You don't think we shall have to sleep here?" asked Betty in consternation. "Surely somebody must have taken your message to Captain Larkett."

She had come to regard their release as practically certain within a matter of hours. But Lady Malchester knew that any one of a hundred things might have happened. So far as help from outside was concerned she held a philosophic view. She had done all she could. If she saw an opportunity to seize an advantage she would do so. Meanwhile she was inclined to accept placidly whatever turned up. She saved her concentration till the moment it was necessary.

She led the conversation to indifferent matters —anything rather than let the girl's mind dwell on present evils. And she succeeded to some extent.

Not again did Mme Levitska trouble them for some hours—though now and again they heard the quiet shuffle of feet outside their door. But at last there came an outbreak of noise. No longer were the footsteps decorous and

stealthy. Men—there could be no doubt it was men—clattered up and down the stairs. They heard Mme Levitska giving sharp, high-pitched directions, though, strain their ears as they would, they could not catch her words. She must have been standing on the stairs near their room. Presently her voice became lower. Lady Malchester listened at the keyhole unashamedly.

"Something has happened to put 'em out, my dear," she whispered. "I wonder what it is? It sounds like house-wreckers."

Betty caught her hand. Her heart was throbbing furiously. "Suppose it is — suppose it is——"

The other woman caught her up sharply. "Nonsense! It would be a different kind of trouble if it were Captain Larkett or Mr. Strang. Listen!"

She bent again to the keyhole, and suddenly sprang back to the couch, where she seated herself. She had narrowly escaped being knocked over by Mme Levitska, who, dressed in outdoor attire, entered the room. Two men followed the woman—man-servants, judging from their livery—burly and big framed.

"I will trouble you ladies to dress, if you please," said Mme Levitska peremptorily. "Will you put on your hats at once?"

Lady Malchester had picked up a magazine and was languidly turning over the leaves. It was Betty who put the obvious question.

"Why should we? Are you taking us away? Where are we going?"

Mme Levitska was standing rigid as some dragon schoolmistress reproving an erring pupil. "I have told you already that I cannot answer questions," she said icily. "Will you put on your hat?"

Betty had a glimpse of Lady Malchester, serenely indifferent, looking with mild interest over the top of the magazine. Her attitude was that of a spectator rather than an actor in the scene. The girl's glance travelled to the two men lounging each side of the doorway. She read little in their faces that seemed hopeful to her, but she determined to venture an appeal.

"Do you men know what you are doing? Do you know that we are held here against our will? This is Lady Malchester, and I am Miss Carstairs. Help us to get out of this place and our friends will pay you well. You know you are risking penal servitude if you help this woman."

The men shifted uneasily, and looked at Mme Levitska, who stood by the fireplace, a half sneer on her handsome face. Her eyes were stony.

"You are wasting time, Miss Carstairs," she said. "If Lady Malchester and yourself are not ready in three minutes I shall"—she paused for a moment—"have you carried out."

Betty's small fists clenched and her breast heaved. She took a step forward as though she were about to resort to physical violence herself. Lady Malchester forestalled her.

"I should keep very still, Madame, if I were you," she said in her soft voice.

Something flashed in her hand, and Mme Levitska found herself looking into the blue muzzle of a pistol held steadily by a slender hand. She winced, but otherwise her countenance did not change. Her eyes gleamed frostily.

"Tell these men not to move," went on Lady Malchester hastily. "I warn you I'll shoot if anyone stirs. Betty, will you go and fetch a policeman—or, better still, a couple?"

For the moment the gentle-voiced woman and her tiny pistol dominated the situation. She was thoroughly enjoying herself. The rustle of Betty's skirts as she moved to obey broke the spell. Madame's frosty glance was fixed on Lady Malchester.

"There is nothing to be gained by a scene, my lady," she said.

"I am sorry to disagree with you, Madame," said the other cheerfully.

Betty had reached the doorway unmolested. Madame came to a quick decision. "Stop that girl! Don't let her go!" she cried sharply.

Even Lady Malchester was taken by surprise. She wheeled sharply, and just for the fraction of a second the pistol muzzle fell away.

A shot startlingly loud echoed through the room, and a shower of plaster fell where the bullet had struck the ceiling. The acrid fumes of cordite filled the place. Betty screamed involuntarily.

Madame had gripped Lady Malchester's wrist with one hand and was struggling to wrest the weapon from her while the muzzle was held away.

Betty had a momentary impression of the two women grappling, arms above their heads, and then presence of mind came back to her. She turned to run.

It was too late. In the first confusion she might have effected her escape, but now, as she reached the landing, one of the men put his arms round her waist and dragged her roughly back. Again she screamed. He pulled her into the room, and with his heel flung the door back.

The other man had gone to the assistance of Mme Levitska, and Lady Malchester immediately abandoned all show of resistance. There was nothing to be gained now, and she was not the woman to waste her strength in a futile struggle.

Mme Levitska smiled grimly as she unloaded the weapon. Like the others she was a little breathless. "You might have killed someone," she said, still with that air of reproving a child.

Lady Malchester humped her shoulders a trifle contemptuously. "You would have brought it on yourself," she answered. And then, angrily: "Tell this man to take his hands off me. It is all over now."

"That will do, Ireton," said Madame calmly. "Help, attend to Miss Carstairs. Get her down first."

Betty writhed vainly. Both men caught hold of her and she was lifted out of the door.

Mme Levitska, watching warily for any move on the part of Lady Malchester, followed close behind. She swung the door on the other woman and they went downstairs.

A word from Madame caused a halt for a second, while she cautiously threw open the door and peered out. Then she returned, and with a swift movement caught a handkerchief over Betty's mouth and tied it behind. Some flimsy stuff was thrown over the girl's head so that the gag would not be noticeable save on a close scrutiny. She was led into the street and lifted into a big, waiting motor-car. One of the men got in with her and pressed her down into a seat with one hand.

Three minutes later Lady Malchester, gagged in similar fashion, was also brought into the car.

Mme Levitska and the other servant took their places and the motor moved smoothly forward.

CHAPTER XXV

"So!" said Patrick Shaugnessy, a trace of satisfaction in his voice. "You see," he went on calmly, "I told you the truth. They are gone. What now?"

He was nursing his knee in his clasped hands, rocking himself slightly to and fro in the big chair. He was wondering what traces—if any—Larkett had found during his search. But Mme Levitska was a competent woman. There would have been nothing.

His heavy face betrayed only a mild curiosity as of one who wonders what the next act of a play will be after the curtain has dropped on the first.

Captain Larkett held a magazine in his fist—the same that had so interested Lady Malchester a short while ago. He ran his forefinger along his moustache abstractedly. There was no sign that he had even heard the spy.

"I wish we had handcuffs," he said, speaking his thoughts aloud.

Shaugnessy's face flushed. A question was on his lips when the Secret Service man gave himself a slight shake as though to rouse himself. "It's queer, Jack," he went on. "A man in my profession only needs handcuffs once in a

lifetime perhaps, and then he hasn't got 'em. I'm told that even at Scotland Yard there's only two or three pairs, and yet if one believed all one reads they're served out as part of the equipment of every constable." He jerked open his cigarette case, proffered it to Strang, and then lit a smoke himself.

Shaugnessy unknitted his hands so that his foot fell heavily. "You were thinking of putting handcuffs on me?" he inquired.

"I was," agreed Larkett shortly. "I want to make sure of you this time." His glance wandered about the room. "Don't let Mr. Shaugnessy distract you, Jack. Hang on to that pistol. Shoot if he gives you a chance. It wouldn't be altogether a bad thing if you did."

"You are getting bloodthirsty," sneered Shaugnessy.

Larkett ignored him. "Window-blind cord should do," he murmured. He took a penknife from his pocket and slashed at the cord of the venetian blinds. Then he stood over Shaugnessy with a couple of lengths in his hand.

"Hang on to that pistol, Jack," he said. "Now, Shaugnessy, I want your hands behind you."

"I say——" remonstrated the Irishman.

"No talk, or you'll get hurt."

He spat the words out from between his teeth —the first outward sign of his perturbation. Shaugnessy shrugged his shoulders and obeyed. It was a matter of seconds only before the hands

of the spy were neatly lashed behind him. He made a grimace of pain.

"Easy, I say. That's confoundedly tight."

"I mean it to be," answered Larkett grimly. "It's all right, Jack. You can put that pistol in your pocket now." His eyes, usually so steady and inscrutable, dwelt ominously on the bound man. "Shaugnessy, I'm going to give you a chance. You will tell us where Lady Malchester and Miss Carstairs are?"

Unconsciously he put Lady Malchester's name first. He would have been very unwilling to admit that he had allowed a human element—even a personal element—to enter into an investigation. An investigator, whether of secret political matters or of crime, may be as enthusiastic as he pleases, but he must have no personal stake in the matter. That was one of the cardinal points of Larkett's faith. In Strang himself he had an instance of the incapacity for cool judgment and calculation of a clever man much moved. He told himself that he was angry because Shaugnessy had introduced women as pawns in the game.

"Lady Malchester?" said the spy thoughtfully. "That's a new one on me. Who is she? What has she got to do with all this?"

If Larkett had been less certain, Shaugnessy's air might have given him doubts. He picked up the magazine he had brought down.

"Don't fence with me, Shaugnessy," he said. "You can save your lies."

"You're losing your temper, Captain Larkett," returned Shaugnessy. "You've got me tied up, and you can call me a liar all you want to."

"Oh, we've done with the amenities for a while," said Larkett shortly. He strode back and forth across the room. "Words don't hurt a man like yourself, Shaugnessy. Why, it's funny—you a hireling of child and women murderers—you who've been doing the dirtiest work of all to talk as if you were on the same plane with decent folk! Pah! You make me physically sick."

Strang looked at his friend in astonishment. This was a new Larkett to him. This was not the man whose self-control he had rarely known to be shaken. For some reason the Secret Service man was shaken out of himself.

"Look here, Strang," went on Larkett in a strained unnatural voice, tapping the magazine, "I found in a room above this, furnished more or less as a sitting-room, but without windows, and with a strong spring lock on the door—such a lock as is not often found on the sitting-room doors of private houses. There were hats in the room—two women's hats."

"Two?" repeated Shaugnessy. "Well, I don't understand it, unless Madame——" He still believed that Larkett had no certain information about Lady Malchester, and he was not giving away a chance.

Larkett apparently did not hear him. He went on:

"In the centre of the mantelpiece, obviously put there to attract the attention of anyone entering the room, was this magazine. Lady Malchester has written on the borders of the pages. The two girls were taken from here an hour ago—she gives the time—by force. Lady Malchester had a pistol. She tried to threaten them with it—Mme Levitska and two men dressed as servants—but they got it away from her—though there is a bullet-hole in the ceiling, showing that at least one shot was fired—probably in the struggle. The decision to move them must have come suddenly, for sleeping arrangements had been discussed. Someone gave instructions that they were to be taken away. You can't play with us any longer, Shaugnessy. Where are they?"

Shaugnessy eyed him doggedly. "If Lady Malchester has been here it's without my knowledge. In any case, I know no more than you do where they are gone."

"Be careful, Shaugnessy," warned Larkett grimly.

Shaugnessy laughed. "I'm a dull fool, I suppose," he said. "'Pon me soul, it never occurred to me that you were a human being, Captain Larkett. I can understand Strang—Strang doesn't make any secret that he's in love. I will say this for you, though—you've got good taste. Lady Malchester is——"

"Shut up!" ordered Larkett fiercely.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to tread on your corns.

Still, it is amusing, isn't it?" He chuckled hoarsely deep in his throat. "Why, you're a knight-errant as well as Strang. Say, don't you think we might as well stop this tomfoolery? I've got the women and I mean to keep them—unless we come to terms."

Larkett's fists clenched tightly. Slowly they relaxed, and he turned frigidly to the Irishman.

"I'll give you one more chance, Shaugnessy. Will you tell us where they are?"

"On terms," grinned Shaugnessy. He began to believe that he had the whiphand.

Some dying embers glowed in the fireplace. Larkett raked them together with deliberation and placed the poker on top. A smile came to Shaugnessy's face—a smile in which there was a trace of uneasiness. It was never safe to predict what a man like Larkett might do.

"That's meant for a threat, I suppose?" he laughed. "You hope to frighten me into telling you something I don't know."

There was no laughter in Larkett's countenance. He drew up a chair near the fire and methodically adjusted the poker to the blaze. Until Shaugnessy spoke he had been playing on the hope that the fat man was a physical coward. Now he determined to see the thing through in deadly earnest.

"It's illegal, isn't it?" he said sharply. "I wonder you don't appeal to the law, Shaugnessy—the English law, that will take you out with a white bandage over your eyes and put a merciful

period to your activities." He examined the poker and thrust it back between the bars. " This isn't quite English, you know. Have you any German blood in you, Shaugnessy? It would be satisfaction to me to think so. Did you ever hear of some of the things that happened to little children in Belgium? You're not a child, Shaugnessy, and we can't hope to compete with your friends. But we'll do our best—unless you talk."

" I——" began Shaugnessy. Something stuck in his throat and he did not go on.

" There's a room upstairs that will suit our purpose admirably," said Larkett coldly.

Strang had gone very white. Angry as he was with Shaugnessy it was in hot blood. He had an ordinary young Englishman's feelings and instincts, and the cold, matter-of-fact way in which Larkett was making preparations to force Shaugnessy to speak revolted him. The way in which Larkett spoke showed that he was not bluffing.

" What are you going to do? " he asked. He spoke quietly.

" Help me get this man upstairs," said the other.

Strang obeyed. Until actual necessity arose he would not interfere. Between them they hustled the spy up the staircase and into the room so lately occupied by Betty and Lady Malchester. Larkett returned to fetch the poker.

The Irishman swore fiercely in a low voice. Then he addressed the airman :

" You're not going to permit this, Mr. Strang? The man's mad—stark, staring mad."

" Where is Betty? " asked Strang hoarsely. He did not recognise his own voice.

Before Shaugnessy could answer the Secret Service man had returned bearing the white-hot poker. He put it down by the fender.

" Jack," he said, " you'd better go. There's no need for more than one of us to be in this. Go home. I will ring you up later."

Shaugnessy's face was working. " You'll not leave me with this madman, Mr. Strang? He'll murder me."

The airman caught at his friend. " This is enough, Larkett," he said. " You can't go on."

" I'll have no interference, Jack," said the other harshly.

Strang braced himself. " You'll not go on with this," he said resolutely.

CHAPTER XXVI

An unsuspected and surprising strain of dour cruelty had revealed itself in Larkett. He was as quiet and self-contained as ever, but something had brought to the surface all the brute that was in him. Jack Strang was no deep student of psychology, but even without the Irishman's taunts he could scarcely have failed to guess the reason. Nevertheless, much as he detested Shaugnessy—hot as his anger still burned—he could not contemplate deliberate physical torture to extort a statement from the Irishman. Such an idea was utter madness. He began seriously to doubt the Secret Service man's sanity.

He could understand an outburst of anger. Under a surge of passion he had himself done foolish things that day which had earned reproof from Larkett. But his instinct revolted at this deliberate preparation for torture in cold blood.

Larkett, save that his eyes flamed with a strange light, was entirely calm and self-possessed. It was that which made his preparation so nerve-shaking. To Strang, such a thing was unthinkable. Now that he saw plainly what he had to do, his brain had cleared.

"You can't go on with this, you know,

Larkett," he insisted. His jaw was set. He had determined that even if it came to a physical encounter he would save his friend from the disgrace of the act he contemplated. " I won't allow it."

For a moment the devil peeped out in Larkett's face. His fist tightened, and Strang involuntarily recoiled as though expecting a blow. Then the mask dropped again, and Larkett appeared cool, inscrutable, with face of granite.

" You won't allow it ? " he said slowly. " Do you know that he "—he jerked his thumb at the bound man—" is capable of most things ? He may have sent them out of the country ; there may be a score of things happen unless——" He broke off, and laid a hand on Strang's shoulder —" Jack, old boy, think of Miss Carstairs. It may be the only way to save her. I'll make this man talk."

Strang had already made up his mind. He had been ready enough to accept guidance, to let Larkett act as he thought best hitherto, but he was firm in this. He was pale, but his chin dogged.

" Never mind Betty. This stops right here."

The Secret Service man thrust both hands deep in his trousers pockets, and with his gaze fixed abstractedly on Shaugnessy jingled some coins savagely. For five minutes he remained in contemplation, and no one spoke. Gradually the grim lines about his face relaxed. The mental storm through which he had passed was

vanishing. An uncertain, rueful smile flashed across his features.

With a quick movement he held out his hand to Strang.

"You're right, Jack. It would be sheer lunacy. My brain must be giving way." He was almost humble. "I shan't forget that you stopped me making a fool of myself. All the same, we have got to do something with this man."

"Hand him over to the police, I suppose," said Strang.

Perspiration was gleaming on the broad forehead of the Irishman now that the strain was over. Yet he was smiling equably, as though he regarded the whole thing as a farce got up for his benefit. "Ah, the police!" he said. "That will be more regular—if it comes to that. Don't you think, however, this little dispute can be settled?"

"I'll enter into no bargain now," interrupted Larkett.

"You've got me beat," protested Shaugnessy. "I'll admit that you've got nothing to lose by going easy. I can't hope to get the plans now, and every day makes a difference. Now here's a proposition that can't hurt you at all. Let's call it quits, and you allow me to get out of the country—say to Rotterdam."

"What about the women?" demanded Strang.

"I'll wire where they are to be found when

I'm safely away." His tone was virtuously reasonable. "I must have some assurance that I shan't be dropped on. Come. I give you my word that the moment I reach Rotterdam I will wire you."

Larkett's eyebrows shot up. "Out of the question, as you know, Shaugnessy," he said curtly. "Even if we could rely on your word —and you know we can't—we couldn't accept. If the game's up, what's to hinder you putting us in touch with the ladies?"

The direct question obviously had Shaugnessy embarrassed. His eyes dropped before Larkett's searching gaze. He knew now that, whatever happened, he had no chance of gaining the plans from Strang. In that direction he had played his last card. But while he held the women in his power, he felt that his opponents would be reluctant to proceed to extremities. He had no intention of relaxing his hold until he knew that he was in a dilemma from which no other expedient could extricate him.

His mind was working quickly under the stimulus of circumstances. He was cornered to an extent, but he wanted to see what his antagonists proposed to do.

He merely conceived it lightly that they would go to the full extent of the advantage that they had obtained in capturing him. They would use every effort to force him to speak first. If they turned him over to the civil or

the military authorities he would be dealt with sternly and rapidly, and the search for Betty and Lady Malchester would remain.

"There's many things," he answered deliberately. "The chief one is that I set a certain value on my life. And unless I get out of this country under safeguards now, I'm a dead man, as you know."

Larkett's chin set. "I can't go outside my duty," he said resolutely. "What I can do is this: If you like to make a clean breast of everything—*everything*, understand me—giving details of what you know of the German espionage organisation, as well as putting us on the track of the women, I'll put in a word for you at the court. That will probably have an effect on the sentence."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," said the Irishman ironically. "Do I strike you as the kind of man who'd prefer twenty years' penal servitude to a quick death? It doesn't tempt me a little bit. Even if it did, I should not accept. You say you can't take my word, Captain Larkett. Why should I take yours?"

The insolence of the retort would have amused the Secret Service man on another occasion. Now he merely shrugged. "It's different—quite different," he answered.

"Have it your way," said the Irishman philosophically. "What now? The police, as Mr. Strang suggests? I may remind you it is rather late."

"I don't think we will trouble the police officially," said Larkett, and the spy smiled.

The Secret Service man drew Strang out on to the landing and closed the door. "Will you see this chap and me in a taxi-cab, and then take a message for me to Scotland Yard?" he said. "Oh, you needn't look doubtful, Jack. I'm steady enough now. If Lever or Winter is there, tell them I would like a couple of the most reliable men indefinitely. They needn't be brilliant—just bulldogs who can be trusted to keep guard and keep their mouths shut. I don't want any of this business to become public yet, as it will if we make it a police matter. There's a place at Brixton—here's the address—where we can hold Shaugnessy till we have drawn his teeth, or at least till we find it necessary to let him go."

Strang read the card that had been put in his hand. It said simply:

MR. JOHN SMITH,
129 Lashbrook Road,
Brixton.

"Suppose there is no one at Scotland Yard?" he asked.

"There'll be someone there. You can either wait or leave a message if neither Lever nor Winter is there. I shall come on to the Yard immediately after I have got rid of him." He nodded towards the closed door. "There won't be much more we can do to-night, and we're

all feeling the need of sleep. My nerves are going, anyway. That was the reason why . . . His voice trailed off. "A sleep will pull us together."

"You're sure you'll be all right?" said Strang dubiously. "Hadn't I better come with you to Brixton first? If he gets awkward——"

"I shall manage all right. A man with his hands tied behind his back isn't going to make much trouble. Besides, it will save time."

They went back into the room. Shaugnessy affected sullenness. "This cord is cutting my wrists confoundedly," he said peevishly. "I wish you'd loosen it a bit."

"Not much," said Larkett good-humouredly. "We'll exchange it for handcuffs later on. Meanwhile, I'm afraid you must resign yourself. We're going to take a leaf out of your book, Shaugnessy. This is an abduction. We're going to hold you until something happens. Will you fetch a cab, Jack?"

It was in the small hours of the morning that Larkett and his charge reached Brixton. A broad-shouldered man in a dressing-gown answered the Secret Service man's ring. He evinced no surprise at a call at such an hour, and his face was perfectly impassive as he stood aside to allow room for the fat bulk of Shaugnessy to pass in the narrow passage.

It might have been the most commonplace thing in the world for him to be roused out of his slumbers to receive a prisoner in the middle

of the night. But he had not been selected as tenant of an accommodation address for the Secret Service without the possession of certain qualities. In the old days, before he had retired from official connection with Scotland Yard, he had been a detective under Lever with a record of which few could boast.

A Secret Service salary is an acceptable addition to the pension of a police-officer, for although the work is at times strenuous, there are periods of leisure in which a man may find time for quiet enjoyment of life.

Larkett's explanations were just enough to give his subordinate an idea of the importance of closely watching Shaugnessy. His instructions were also concise.

"Two men are coming on from the Yard, Grey. They ought to be here any moment now. You are in charge. Someone has got to be with this man night and day—in the same room."

"Very good, sir," said Grey. Not the least of his qualities was a natural taciturnity which an earthquake could not have broken down.

"You can cut his hands free when the other men come. I shouldn't advise you to do so before."

"You flatter me," sneered Shaugnessy.

"I'll see to him," said Grey stolidly.

"Right you are. I'll probably be along in the morning. Good-night, Grey."

"Good-night, sir."

Larkett went out into the night. Grey towered over the prisoner.

"Come on, Shaugnessy," he said gruffly. "I'll show you where you'll have to sleep. No, you go first."

The little procession of two made its way upstairs, slowly, because Shaugnessy found how difficult such a simple feat may be when hands are tied—and up to the third floor. Grey ushered him into a room with a couple of single beds. "This ought to do for you," he said. "It's no good looking at the window, because even a monkey would break its neck if it tried to climb through that. We'll make the place a bit more comfortable to-morrow. But mind, no tricks now."

"I know the kind of man I mustn't play tricks with," answered the spy. "You're not that sort."

Grey's grim visage relaxed appreciably.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE conference that took place at Scotland Yard after Larkett had disposed of his prisoner was not a long one, lasting, as a matter of fact, rather less than half an hour.

Sleep, as the Secret Service man said, was essential, and with both Shaugnessy and Cotton safely held it was unlikely that any developments would arise for a few hours. Consideration of the next steps could easily be postponed for that time.

The meeting broke up. On the electric car that carried Winter homeward a newspaper man whose spell of duty had just ended shifted his seat next to the superintendent.

A thin man with long black hair, sallow face, and weary, humorous eyes, he was one of the keenest of that band of crime investigators to which Fleet Street pays salaries that make the official detectives' mouths water.

"Hallo, Mr. Winter!" he said. "Been on a burst, or are the Huns going to blow up Scotland Yard?"

The superintendent passed his cigar-case. "Just a few office matters wanted clearing up," he said casually. "I didn't like to get in arrears."

The weary eyes became alert. The reporter was well acquainted with men and methods at Scotland Yard. "I didn't know you were so enthusiastic on office routine," he remarked languidly. "Now, if it had been a big case——"

"Nothing doing," said Winter succinctly. "There's only this railway outrage business, and Marsh is handling that." He stifled a yawn.

The reporter nodded approvingly. "Easy job—for Marsh," he murmured. He puffed at his cigar.

Winter stole a glance at the expressionless face. He wondered exactly what the reporter meant. He crossed his knees without comment.

"Marsh," went on the reporter, "is a good man—a convenient man. He doesn't talk. Isn't he what they call in America a stool-pigeon?"

"What's a stool-pigeon?" queried Winter innocently, and the journalist laughed.

"A stool-pigeon," he explained, "is a person who knowingly or unknowingly hides the real game that is being played. I know something is going on. There was a chap came to our office to-night with a cock-and-bull story of some aeroplane plans that had gone astray. Offered to sell us his story. Said that they had something to do with this man Brockford."

"Oh!" said Winter, as one whom politeness keeps from giving expression to boredom. "I suppose you sent the yarn up to the Press Bureau? Rather risky to run anything of that kind nowa-

days, I imagine. Take my word, there's nothing in it."

"You think we bought the story then?" said the reporter quickly.

"Oh, I don't know. You newspaper folk chuck money away sometimes. How much did he rook you for, Mr. Silvervale?"

The journalist had half turned in his seat so that he might see Winter's face. The superintendent noticed the action, though it had been done as if mechanically. He remained outwardly bland and unmoved.

"Yes, we did buy the story," said Silvervale, his listless eyes watching the other. "We paid pretty stiff for it. I came up to the Yard to see Lever or yourself about it, but you were out."

"And I suppose it's being printed now?" The superintendent spoke gravely. "I'm sorry for you, Mr. Silvervale. It's a pity. *The Telephone* will run a pretty good chance of being suppressed. In any event it will be a laughing-stock. I'm surprised at your people."

"Oh, we'd take some risks if we cared to. But, as a matter of fact, we're not printing the story. Not that we don't believe it. There's still a little patriotism left in Fleet Street. All the same, one never knows when a thing like this may be useful. See here, Mr. Winter. Shall we lay our cards on the table? This story was brought to us by a man named Foster. Do you know the name?"

"I know scores of Fosters," returned the superintendent non-committally.

"Well, he says Brockford put a man up to burgling certain plans from the safe of Strang—the aeroplane inventor, you know, and he connects that with the shooting."

"H'm," said Winter. He contrived to put a subtle inflection of decisive incredulity into the monosyllable.

"Very well." Silvervale was animated now. "I thought it was a put-up thing. I tackled the Admiralty. They knew nothing. I went to the Yard. They swore that both you and Lever were out—and yet you say you've been at work there till now. Wait a minute. I went to Strang's flat in Ashley Gardens. The door was opened to me by one of the Special Branch men. He refused to tell me what he was doing there. That looks as if there was something in the story—eh?"

Winter closed his eyes. It was evident that Silvervale had got hold of enough facts and suspicions to arouse all his newspaper instincts. He knew too much to be convinced by denial. An attitude of antagonism would probably stiffen him to pursue his investigations and deductions more closely. It would be easy to prevent publication. A word in the right quarter and *The Daily Telephone* would receive a stern warning as to the consequences if it attempted to use its scoop. War had played havoc with the boasted freedom of the Press. A less per-

emptory way was, however, open to him. There were times when his department was not averse from asking favours of the Press—and Silvervale himself was not a man he would willingly antagonise.

The superintendent looked round. That was a matter of habit. He knew that they had the top of the car to themselves.

"This puts me in a very awkward position, Mr. Silvervale," he said slowly, "very awkward. I'll not deny that some of your facts are somewhere near right. Mind you, I don't say that the case is in any degree as you are assuming. It's nothing to do with me. If you or your people get burnt fingers, why, you'll only have yourselves to thank. What's the point? What are you proposing to do?"

The reporter leaned back, serenely content now that he had broken down Winter's attitude. "I don't want to spoil things, naturally," he said.

"Oh, don't worry about us, thanks. It's your funeral, not ours."

Silvervale grinned. "You're a regular solid stone wall when you want to be, Mr. Winter. Don't you think we might print a bit of the story —if we're discreet?"

"The discretion of *The Daily Telephone* is proverbial," said Winter.

"Sure." Silvervale smiled good-naturedly at the thrust.

"Look here. I don't want to be harsh, Mr.

Silvervale. We know each other too well for that. You know that we can soon stop any games if we like. It was different before the war. However, suppose we stretch a point. You keep your mouth shut till we're ready, and then you shall have as much of the whole story to yourselves as we think it wise to publish. How will that suit you? "

"You're a sport, Mr. Winter," said the reporter gratefully. "That will satisfy me quite well."

"Right you are, then. I needn't ask you to be careful. Not a word, remember."

"I'll agree to that," said Silvervale briefly. He was entirely satisfied with the way he had managed the detective. He knew that Winter would keep his word. Barring accidents, *The Telephone* would get a "beat" worth waiting for. There was no need for further discussion. "Well, I get off here. Good-night, Mr. Winter—or rather good-morning."

The superintendent nodded a genial farewell and became lost in thought.

. . . . . .

Early as he was at Scotland Yard in the morning Strang was before him, impatiently tapping his heels in the little box of a waiting-room, whose one window looked out on an interior courtyard wherein the chief object of interest was a clumsy sign, "Photo Room," which must have afforded food for speculation to thousands of visitors.

He had read the official police almanac on the

wall with its fund of condensed information in small type from "The Commissioner" to "Wimbledon Borough Council," and had studied the angular photographs of erstwhile police officials—most of them with antiquated silk hats—without appreciation.

Winter shook hands with him. "You're early, Mr. Strang. I thought Captain Larkett and you would not be here till half-past eight. It's barely eight now."

"I woke early," confessed Strang. "I've been here half an hour. Is there anything fresh?"

Winter laughed. "I don't know. My last news is up to the time you left last night. I have been asleep practically the whole time since then. Come into my room and make yourself comfortable."

At half-past eight Lever looked in and went away again. It was nine o'clock before Larkett arrived. He apologised while he removed his coat. "Sorry I'm late. The Big Man sent for me. I've been breakfasting with him. He wants to get on with the construction of those aeroplanes right away. You can arrange that, Jack?"

"I'll arrange that," answered Strang.

"Good. Now let's decide what we can do. Anything fresh from Master Cotton, Lever?"

"Nothing. He's still at —— Street."

Winter interposed, holding up a buff-coloured sheet of note-paper. "Here's a report from one of my men who's made inquiries at the hospital.

Brockford is improving. He'll probably be able to answer a few questions this evening."

Strang noticed that Larkett was his old, cheerful, confident self. Of the impetuous anger of the night before there remained no trace. The little Secret Service man was his own master. He wondered what the detectives would think if they knew that he had been on the point of attempting to obtain information by a method which even supporters of the Third Degree would have condemned as inhuman.

For half an hour the four men talked over the impasse which affairs had reached. A score of ways in which the investigation might be brought to a conclusion was suggested, criticised, and flung aside as impracticable. They were ever confronted with two points—how to make Cotton reveal the hiding-place of the copies of the plans; how to make Shaugnessy reveal where the two women were.

"Shaugnessy will never talk if he's made up his mind," said Lever, stroking his beard. His eyes rested contemplatively for a second on Strang. "I don't see that that matters a great deal, though. We've got him, and he can't do any fresh damage. We can afford to let that side of the case rest for a while anyway. I guess neither of the ladies is likely to come to any harm. Let's deal with one thing at a time."

"Surely you're not going to give up looking for them!" interposed Strang. "We——"

"Now don't get excited, Mr. Strang," said

Lever soothingly. "We'll not abandon them. It's only a question of method."

"Yes," agreed Larkett. "We must keep our minds fixed on the plans."

"Now there's Cotton," went on the superintendent. "He's a different type from Shaugnessy, but he's the man we've got to fathom. He might be persuaded to talk now—again he might not. He's had time to think things over. There's one thing," he added cheerfully, "if we're tied up, so are Shaugnessy and Cotton. Neither of them can make a move."

"We can't keep Cotton in a police cell indefinitely," said Winter. "That's out of the question. We've got to do something about him."

His colleague nodded assent. "If he won't cough up what he knows, all we can hope for is a stroke of luck in some other direction."

"But you men realise how important time is," remonstrated Larkett. "We can't fold our arms and wait. Shaugnessy has confederates. They'll be active. How do we know that Cotton's copies are inaccessible to them—to anyone? He may have had confidants. I don't say that he had—but he might." He struck one fist into the palm of his other hand. "I don't say he has—but he might."

"What do you propose, Captain Larkett?" asked Lever.

"We must take his terms. Pay him a thousand pounds and help him out of the country. What

does it matter anyway? He's small beer—a tough who will sooner or later get his deserts. We can't weigh a point of justice against the interests of the country."

The two detectives gazed at each other and then at Larkett. Then Winter removed his pince-nez and vigorously polished the glasses with a handkerchief.

"Are you in earnest?" he asked.

"Quite in earnest," said Larkett.

Lever said nothing. Winter continued to polish his glasses with unnecessary energy. His brow was furrowed into a frown.

"Of course, in a certain sense we're under your instructions," he said slowly. "I know how important this is, Captain Larkett—don't think I fail to realise that. But if we could think of any other way—why, we should prefer it."

Blank astonishment appeared in Larkett's face. He could not understand the superintendent's hesitation in the face of a matter of such moment. True, it was breaking the law—but a fracture of an Act of Parliament was comparatively a small matter. The recovery of the plans was all-important.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why?"

The usually imperturbable superintendent shifted as though he had suddenly found his seat uncomfortable. "It's a bit hard, perhaps, for you to understand," he said hesitatingly. "If Brockford dies—and there's no certainty about that—this man Cotton is a murderer."

As a usual thing Larkett was not an unscrupulous man. But in pursuit of what he conceived to be his duty there were few obstacles which he would not trample over. The release of Cotton would be an offence against abstract justice. But to free a criminal from punishment for a crime already committed would injure no person individually, although it might be inexpedient from the point of view of society. What was the punishment or freedom of even a murderer compared to the issues at stake?

"I don't know what to make of you, Winter," he said, with a touch of petulance. "The matter does not seem to me to be one for argument. I don't care if this man has murdered fifty people. Now be reasonable. In an affair of public policy—of material safety—we don't want to split over a bit of red tape."

"I know all about that," agreed Winter stolidly. "I'd be the last man to stick to red tape in a case of this sort. I'll own you're right, but there are reasons why I'd rather have any arrangement than this. You see, Captain Larkett, I've spent more than thirty years in the service, and though we of the police are used to having stones thrown at us, there is a limit. There are many people who know that Cotton escaped last night; there are many who know that he's again in custody. I wouldn't mind so much if it was only the police, though constables will talk, and no amount of discipline can stop it. The release of Cotton would be extremely

awkward. It would be worse than that; it would defeat your object of secrecy far beyond any other method if we can hit upon one."

"Do you mean that your constables know enough of the case to gossip openly——" began the Secret Service man angrily.

"No, sir, they do not." Winter was a trifle on his dignity. "I mentioned them by the way. You were saying just now that Cotton might have told anyone about the plans. Well, he has. You remember Yid Foster as the man who brought Maxwell into touch with Brockford? Now Foster knows something—not everything perhaps, but more than enough—and he has leaked to a newspaper man. This chap—a man on *The Telephone*—is, unfortunately for us, shrewd enough to nose out many things. He knows a lot and he guesses more."

Larkett rolled a pen to and fro under his hand on the flat surface of the table. "I begin to see," he said more mildly. "What's troubling you, Mr. Winter, is a bad attack of *esprit de corps*. I didn't believe you were the sort of man to be alarmed by the newspapers. You can shut them off whenever you like."

"I'm not," said Winter doggedly. "But if we let this man go in this barefaced fashion, do you think Silvervale won't hear of it? It doesn't matter to you, Captain Larkett, but the war won't last for ever. Then we can't stop him publishing whatever he likes."

"I see," said Larkett. His eyes were twinkling,

He appreciated how Winter felt, and he had no desire to ride roughshod over the superintendent's feelings if he could achieve his purpose by any other means. He began to believe that he could. " This man—Silvervale—you've headed him off for the time being ? "

" Yes. I've made an agreement that he shall know as much as is suitable to print at the right time."

Winter made a gesture as though clearing himself of the subject, stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, and sat back.

" Well, perhaps my scheme would be a little precipitate," said Larkett, as though reflecting aloud. " I think in any case I'll have another shot to dig something out of Cotton first. Tell me, when could I get to see him ? "

Winter's face cleared at what he took to be a quiet acquiescence with his views. " Sure," he said, " I'll come with you."

" I'd rather see him alone, if you don't mind. Perhaps I shall be able to persuade him better that way."

" Just as you like. I'll give you a note to the divisional inspector of the C.I.D."

" We'll decide what to do about Shaugnessy when I come back," said Larkett. " I don't expect to be more than an hour."

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was a curious thing that, although New Scotland Yard was on the telephone, Larkett should have preferred to go to the public call-office in Westminster Bridge Road. It was still more curious, as the effect of his message was to bring to a retired tea-room off the Haymarket three retired members of the Criminal Investigation Department, to whom he gave explicit and positive directions—orders which would have interested Winter, though he had no conception that they were being issued.

Vine Street Police Station is tucked away at the back of Piccadilly, amid a tangle of streets and alleys which only a methodical brain can remember. Larkett approached the station through a passage from Regent Street.

One of the men with whom he had been speaking was a few yards behind him, but did not follow down the passage. He was casually interested in a jeweller's shop which commanded a view of the approach.

The Secret Service man found the divisional detective-inspector to whom his letter of introduction was addressed busy about his office. A tall man dressed with scrupulous neatness and

with a glittering diamond ring on his finger, he received Larkett with a punctilious politeness that was partly habit and partly brought about by the terms of his chief's letter.

"Mr. Winter says I am to place myself at your disposal, sir, and that you are at liberty to see this man Cotton. I shall be exceedingly happy if I can be of any assistance. We will go along and see him now."

"That's very good of you, I'm sure," said Larkett. "Perhaps, however, it won't be necessary to trouble you. I merely want a little chat with Cotton alone. After then, perhaps, I shall know where I stand."

A man who has achieved the rank of divisional detective-inspector in the Criminal Investigation Department usually knows the value of discretion. The officer had already had his curiosity piqued by the strange arrival of Cotton in the custody of the two superintendents of the department. Nor was a secret interview with a man at whose profession he could make a very good guess calculated to allay it.

He took Larkett into the glass-partitioned inspectors' room, where uniformed inspectors sat on high stools at tall desks busy with official-looking books and papers. He said a few words in a low voice to one of them, who descended from his stool, yelled in a stentorian voice for "Johnson," and led them into the charge-room.

Larkett already had some idea of the "run" of the police-station, and he was refreshing his

memory. At the end of the charge-room was a locked door leading to the cells. A detention-room with two doors, one opening into the corridor lined by the cells, the other opening into the charge-room, lay on the left. Any person leaving the detention-room must pass through the charge-room—usually empty at that time of day—by the door of the inspectors' room, into a corridor, and out into the street. There was a reserve man on duty at the door, and even should the corridor be empty, anyone going out must inevitably be seen from the detectives' room. Cotton might fairly be deemed secure here. There was little opportunity for him to repeat his Highgate exploit.

It was in the detention-room where the interview with Winter and Lever had taken place the previous evening that Larkett again faced Cotton.

The uniformed inspector met a request for the key with a stare of surprise and interrogation at the detective. "I don't want to have to ring," pleaded the Secret Service man nonchalantly.

"All right, sir. It's against our rules, but in *your case*——"

They went out. From under his white eyebrows Cotton scrutinised the Secret Service man with an attitude of calculation.

"Well," said Larkett cheerfully. "We meet again, Cotton."

"So it seems," answered the other truculently. "Come to do some more chin wagging,

I suppose. I told your pals what I wanted last night. If you think you can get round that, you're mistaken. You splits are all the same."

Larkett ignored the lack of friendliness in the other's tone. He smiled pleasantly. "That's a very natural mistake, Cotton. I am not a detective."

"I hear you say it," growled Cotton.

"Well, I'm not. You can take my word for it. It just occurred to me to look you up because I think I can do you a good turn."

"Oh!" There was a world of incredulity in the monosyllable. "What in blazes are you, then? How did you get in here? Who are you? What do you want?"

"Sorry I can't answer all your questions," said Larkett smoothly. "I tell you again that I'm not a police-officer." He shifted his chair close to the other, and his voice fell to a whisper. "Are you still of the same mind that you were last night?"

"What's that?"

"You offered the copies of some plans to the police for a thousand. Will you let me have 'em at that price? Think it over."

The criminal's face was distorted in what he meant to be a cunning sneer. He hunched his thin shoulders upwards. "What's the game, guv'nor? You say you're not a detective, and yet you seem to have the run of police-stations. You're mighty close to headquarters if you're not. You won't tell me your name; you won't

say who you are. You're trying some twist on me."

Larkett shook his head in vehement denial.

"This is straight, Cotton. You shall have that money paid over to yourself or whoever you like to name. I can't say fairer than that. I give you my word I am not acting for Scotland Yard. They don't know for what purpose I'm here."

"Got anything to smoke?" Cotton growled. "That's more like," as Larkett passed his cigarette-case. "Can I have two or three? They took all mine away from me."

"Have the lot." The Secret Service man tumbled them out on the table and put the case back.

Cotton gave a grunt of thanks, and bundling them loosely in his pockets, accepted a match. The cigarette consumed fiercely under sharp puffs. Larkett waited.

"It's no good, guv'nor—not a bit of good," said Cotton at last. "A thousand or a million is all the same to me if I'm up against you know what." His eyes narrowed to mere slits through which he peered at the face of the Secret Service man. "Let me get out of here and we'll be able to talk."

"That's not so easy," remarked Larkett, as if considering.

Cotton exploded in a sharp oath. "What kind of a mug do you take me for, then?" he demanded. "What's the good of a thousand or

ten thousand or a million to me if I got to be bumped off by a bloke in a black cap? That's what happens to me if I stay here, and well you know it. Cut out that stuff."

"You will let me have 'em at that price if I get you out?"

"Sure! You bet I will, guv'nor." Cotton's voice was eager.

"You'll have to take a chance."

"You watch me."

Larkett had long ago made up his mind. Obviously it was hopeless to expect Cotton to come to any terms that did not include escape. His gaze dwelt calculatingly on the criminal. "Where can I find you once you're outside?" he asked.

Cotton gave an address at an obscure street in Kennington.

"I'll take your word for that," said Larkett. "Now, listen. We're much about a size. That chair there's heavy enough to stun a man. I've got the key or this room on me. You take my hat and overcoat, turn to the left when you get outside the door, and walk straight out. Keep the collar well turned up."

A mixture of emotions showed on Cotton's face. He stood up and gripped the back of his chair convulsively. "You mean that, guv'nor?" he asked hoarsely.

Larkett assented. "If you've got nerve enough. You may not get out of the station. You'll have to take the risk of that. Mark you, if you fail, you mustn't implicate me."

"Meaning you'll swear I hit you unawares? I got you, guv'nor. You shan't suffer. I don't know what your game is, but you're all right. Tell when you're ready."

"Now," said Larkett.

It was done with expedition and neatness. The Secret Service man dropped over the table—that made less noise than falling on the floor would have done—and relapsed into unconsciousness.

A quarter of an hour later an inspector came running in answer to a furious ringing of the electric bell from the detention-room. He rattled fiercely at the outer door, but still the ringing continued. Not until the constable who acted as jailer unlocked the inner door leading from the cells did he obtain entrance.

Larkett staggered towards them. There was an ugly wound on his temple, and his face was stained with blood. The jailer caught him in his arms and supported him.

The inspector's first thought was instinctively of the prisoner rather than of the injured man. His eyes swept the apartment. "Where is he?" he cried.

The Secret Service man groaned. He did not appear to understand.

"The prisoner? Cotton? Where is he?" demanded the inspector again.

"Gone," said Larkett mechanically. And then in gasps, "My attention . . . off for a minute . . . he hit me . . . can't have got far . . . feel a bit giddy."

"Take him into the divisional surgeon's room," said the inspector, grasping, as he thought, the situation. "Get a doctor at once. This is a C.I. matter."

To Larkett, lying on a couch in the divisional surgeon's room, there came later Winter, Lever, and Strang. The former wore a frown, which rather increased than diminished as his eyes rested on the bandaged man. He made no expression of sympathy.

"You've been and gone and done it now, Captain Larkett," he said, a trifle bitterly.

Larkett smiled feebly. "Sorry," he murmured. "Blame it all on me."

The superintendent said something under his breath.

"Eh?" said Larkett.

"I *do* blame it all on to you," said Winter frankly.

The Secret Service man wagged a hand slowly to and fro as though in deprecation of censure. But his eyes were very bright and triumphant. "You're never satisfied, Winter," he said painfully. "These things will happen."

"This was a little idea you had up your sleeve when you were soaping me down at the Yard," pursued the superintendent. "I might have known it."

"Don't take it to heart," smiled his tormentor. "Think of the men in the trenches."

"I'm thinking of something else," said Winter bluntly. "I'm thinking that twice in as many

days a dangerous crook has escaped from a London police-station. Are you as badly hurt as you seem? Your friend might have played light as a favour. Funny he should use a chair, as Shaugnessy did against Mr. Strang. Looks as if he had followed an example or had a hint."

Strang had followed the dialogue with some wonderment, although he himself had had some suspicion. "Does this mean——" he began.

Larkett cut him short with more vigour in his voice than had been noticeable before. "I know what you are going to say, Jack. They're a suspicious lot, these Scotland Yard men." He sat up. "I feel better now."

"It makes things so awkward for us," grumbled Winter, smoothing out the wrinkles in his forehead with a white forefinger. "It's all very well for you to joke about it. You've got your way. I wish no harm may come of it. We've got to bear the brunt."

"Now you're ungrateful, Mr. Winter," retorted Larkett. "You're hinting at collusion. I won't admit anything of the kind."

"Well, of all the——" Words failed the superintendent.

"Think of the bright side," went on Larkett. "You didn't want this man released, for reasons of your own. I fell in with your ideas, though I might have insisted, rather than we should have any friction. Now Cotton has escaped by accident——"

"By accident?" interrupted Winter grimly.

"By accident. A dangerous criminal has escaped after nearly killing me. That's all there is to it. You may have your suspicions, but both you and Lever are too old birds to ask direct questions. *You* haven't let the man go. Your hands are clean. Go and catch him again when you like."

Winter shook off his irritation. "There's something in that," he said. "I beg your pardon, Captain Larkett."

"That's all right," said the Secret Service man. He stood up stiffly and took off the bandage, disclosing an unsightly patch of sticking-plaster. "Cotton's a considerate chap. He might have hit a lot harder. Now I shan't be handsome for a day or two, but at least I shall be able to get about."

"I hope you've got those plans?" said Winter.

Larkett's left eyelid fell and rose quickly.

CHAPTER XXIX

Mme Levitska and her associates wasted no time. Everything had apparently been arranged to run with the precision of clock-work, and the motor thudded smoothly on its way as soon as its passengers, voluntary and involuntary, were aboard. The darkened streets gave way to still more darkened country lanes, and still it held on. Mme Levitska herself was seated opposite Betty with Lady Malchester. A blue-chinned servant sat by the girl's side. The other was outside with the driver.

Once the car had started neither of the women had courted any further struggle. It would have been futile. Gagged as they were, they sat silent perforce—nor did a word once pass the lips of Mme Levitska, who, grimly vigilant, sat as immovable as a statue.

There was no clue to be gained through the windows as to the direction they were taking. Outside was solid darkness, broken only occasionally by the flicker of lights as they passed through a village, or the lamp of some lonely house.

Betty had opportunity for reflection, and her thoughts were not entirely gloomy. This sudden

flight, she told herself, could mean but one thing—that help was at their heels.

Perhaps even now Strang or Larkett was following them. She argued the matter out to herself, till she began to believe that it actually was so, to strain her ears for she knew not what sound above the whirr of the car.

Gradually drowsiness overcame her. Her head drooped, and in a little she was asleep. She roused at last as the car slackened speed at an awkward bend, and even the finely-adjusted springs could not altogether hide the jolting as it travelled over an ill-made by-road. Twice it stopped, and Betty heard the clang of gates opening and shutting.

They drew up finally on to a gravelled carriage-drive, and as the car stopped Mme Levitska lowered the window and peered out into the darkness. Someone approached, swinging a lantern.

"We get out here," she said, and descended on the word.

As they descended Betty had an impression of three or four men and another woman. Someone removed the gag from her, and a little group watched her with curiosity, although no one spoke a word.

Mme Levitska questioned the woman: "You got the telegram? Are the rooms ready?"

The woman—a hard-featured, yellow-skinned old dame—curtsied. "Yes, Madame. Will you come this way?"

They moved towards a house shrouded in trees, in a little procession. Betty shivered as they passed through a big oaken door studded with nails. The hall was brilliantly lighted, and they passed into a sitting-room where a meal had been prepared.

"Where are we?" asked Betty. They were the first words she had spoken since they had left London.

"We are out in the country," evaded Mme Levitska.

"An indiscreet question, Betty," put in Lady Malchester. "You should cultivate more tact."

"You will be more comfortable here than at the other place," said Mme Levitska. "Here you will have a certain amount of freedom, as far as circumstances permit. If you will take off your things, Gabble will see to them. You must be hungry after your long ride."

"I could eat an ox," declared Lady Malchester. She was playing up to Madame's lead. As it suited the other to ignore the incidents preceding the flight, she would do so. "I suppose those men we saw are our jailers?"

"They are keepers, Lady Malchester," said Madame, removing her hat. "Gamekeepers. You are on a little farm some way from the beaten track, for Mr. Shaugnessy likes to have his game strictly preserved. Three dogs are let loose at night, and a keeper patrols the farm, so you can feel quite safe here, although it is so lonely."

"A wise precaution." Lady Malchester nodded her head sagely. "In these country places tramps and poachers are such a nuisance."

"No unauthorised person can get within a mile of this house by day or night," volunteered Mme Levitska.

"Not even Zeppelins," said Lady Malchester flippantly. "So you see, Betty, we are quite safe."

She continued to smile, as though she were now thoroughly reassured. But Betty heard Mme Levitska's hint with foreboding.

Neither she nor Lady Malchester, in spite of the latter's boast, ate much at supper. It was a relief when at last they were shown to their rooms. They were adjoining apartments on the second floor, and were furnished with little of the severity that marked the place from which they had come.

Betty was shown into hers first. A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and Gabble fussed about her. "There is nothing else I can do for you, miss?—nothing that you are likely to want?"

The girl shook her head. "No, thank you," she said wearily. Then an inspiration occurred to her. "Do you know who we are?"

The woman rubbed her hand on her apron uncertainly. "You're a friend of Mr. Shaugnessy's, ain't you, miss?"

"Good heavens, no!" The girl moved forward and gripped her by the wrist. "We're

prisoners—brought here against our will. Don't you know Shaugnessy and that woman are German spies? You must help us."

"There, there, my dear," said the old woman soothingly. "You're overtired and want a good sleep. We'll talk about all that in the morning."

"No. You must listen now." Betty was insistent. "See, perhaps you could get a note to the local police—or send a telegram for me. I'll pay you well. If you help these people to keep us here——"

"Don't you think you had better go to bed, Miss Carstairs?" The acid voice of Mme Levitska broke in on them. She was standing with one hand on the door-handle, contemplating them sourly. "I thought you understood," she went on, "that there is not the slightest use in attempting to bribe the servants. Good-night, Miss Carstairs. Come, Gabble."

Gabble obeyed, and Betty heard the key snap in the lock outside as the door closed. Evidently, in spite of the dogs and the keepers, Mme Levitska had resolved not to put temptation in their way.

Madame passed along to Lady Malchester's room. That lady sat on the bed and dangled her feet idly to and fro. She whistled a little tune, and ceased abruptly as Madame spoke.

"This will be more comfortable."

"A decided improvement," agreed Lady Malchester.

"It seems almost a pity," mused Madame, "that you should have to be kept here."

"Don't worry on my account, Madame; I assure you that when you are kept in a much worse place I shan't waste my sympathy."

Madame Levitska bit her lip. Nevertheless, she forced a smile. "You mean prison?" she said. "I do not think it will come to that."

"You can't expect me to endorse your hope," returned Lady Malchester quickly. "Unfortunately, we have not contracted the habit of shooting women—even women spies. It's a pity in some ways. Still, you never can tell what may happen," she concluded hopefully.

Madame placed one hand on the bed-rail. "You are too amiable, Lady Malchester. I might suggest that reflection on your own position rather than mine would be your wisest course. Isn't there an old proverb, 'First catch your hare——'?"

"Oh, you'll be caught all right," said Lady Malchester, nodding her head wisely.

The other woman ignored the flippancy. "What I wanted to say to you, Lady Malchester, was that you are in rather a different position from Miss Carstairs. There is no need for you to remain here unless you choose. If you will give your word not to say or do anything in the matter on which you were engaged, you shall be put in a train for London first thing in the morning."

Lady Malchester had just extricated one

shapely foot from a boot. She hooked the boot on her finger, moving it to and fro reflectively.

"Do you know, Madame," she said, as one stating a fact, "I rather believe you are afraid of me."

"I am," admitted the other frankly. "I would rather be rid of you, if you would agree."

"Ah!" The girl lowered the boot to the floor and pulled it up again. "Does Mr. Shaugnessy agree?"

"He agrees that you are a clever woman."

"Very flattering of him, I'm sure. As I understand it, you want me to give a parole—that's it."

"There will be no object served in detaining you if you will undertake that you will not by any means, direct or indirect, work against us." Madame looked meaningly at the handsome girl on the bed. "Mr. Shaugnessy does not often make mistakes. If he had realised at first the sort of person you are——"

"You would not have been bothered with me now," Lady Malchester finished, with a musical laugh. "Set a woman to catch a woman. You have enlightened him as to the fearful person I am, no doubt."

"He knows my opinion," said Mme Levitska stiffly.

Lady Malchester still dangled her shoe. "Ordinary English won't do justice to my feelings. Would you be very shocked if I lapsed into slang—American slang? I'm just tickled

to death. You'd be content to accept my word—my bare word?"

"Yes, of course." Madame nodded with stately grace.

"And I'm to leave poor little Betty Carstairs without anyone to look after her? I've been fancying myself a sort of chaperon, you know. By the way, where is Shaugnessy?"

The shot fired entirely at random told, although nothing in Mme Levitska's face showed it. She too was wondering where Shaugnessy was. Since that hurried telephone message from him ordering the transference she had heard nothing.

"I don't think that matters," she said coldly. "The point is, what do you propose to do? Don't delude yourself, Lady Malchester. You are receiving every consideration now, but you're dealing with desperate people. You had better take my offer."

"Really,"—Lady Malchester began to unfasten her other shoe,—"I think I will stay where I am."

CHAPTER XXX

LARKETT congratulated himself that he had managed fairly well. He did not believe that the Scotland Yard men were nearly as annoyed by Cotton's second escape as Winter assumed. Not that he would have felt any compunction at trampling on their scruples in any case, but it was satisfactory to know that any friction would be avoided. All the immediate difficulties had been sufficiently dealt with.

He had no misgivings that Cotton would play fair. If that little rogue had imagined Larkett to be sufficiently simple to accept his bare word the mistake would not long persist in his mind. The Secret Service man had not neglected steps to ensure that little should go wrong—and he knew that unless something very unexpected happened it was only a matter of hours before the plans would be in his possession.

He chuckled aloud as he strolled arm in arm with Strang down Piccadilly.

"The funniest thing I've seen for months," he declared, "was Winter's face when he tumbled to what had happened. I believe he would have liked to hit me."

"You took rather a high hand," said Strang.

"I had to. The only alternative would have made the two superintendents so sore that I should have felt a cad after the way they've backed me up. No use in hurting the susceptibilities of anyone, Jack. No, it was the only way out. Don't you believe that Winter's so upset as he pretends to be. In reality he's delighted. Any blame is off the shoulders of the police now. They've got a satisfactory explanation if anyone raises a kick, and they can say quite honestly they were not to blame."

Both men relapsed into silence. They were thinking of the other side of the problem. From the official point of view, as Larkett knew, he ought to be concentrating his energies entirely on the recovery of the plans. The whereabouts of Betty Carstairs and Lady Malchester should be quite a subordinate consideration. Since the night before, the little Secret Service man had fought down his personal interest for a time, but his anxiety had merely been kept dormant.

Strang it was who broke the silence. He had felt no need to put a restraint on his feelings. If it came to a choice between Betty and the plans he felt that he might after all give way to temptation. It was all very well for Larkett to be so cool about it, he reflected, as he stole a glance at his companion. What did his invention matter after all? Sooner or later Germany would be bound to know all about S. and B. aeroplanes. While the fate of Betty was still unknown he resented the time he re-

garded as lost being employed to trace the plans. Emotion is apt to deprive even the most lofty-minded man—which Strang was not—of the faculty of cold reason. If the plans reached Germany, so much the worse; but that did not mean Germany would beat England.

"We are going to Brixton?" he asked. "Perhaps Shaugnessy will have altered his mind."

"We are going to Brixton," agreed Larkett. "I expect some reports to be sent there later. Don't let's expect too much from Shaugnessy, Jack. He——"

He stopped in the middle of a sentence. Strang's nerves were already sufficiently ragged. There was no object in dashing any hope he might sustain. For Larkett had a very clear idea as to the Irishman's reasons for stubbornly concealing the whereabouts of the two women. He also had a personal interest in the game. He had failed so far to obtain the plans, but he was unlikely to give up Betty Carstairs willingly.

"You were going to say——?"

"I was going to say that no great harm can come to the women while we hold Shaugnessy. He can do nothing. We have only to consider the woman Levitska."

"I almost wish," said Strang bitterly, "tha I'd fallen in with Shaugnessy's proposal and made the plans over to him."

Larkett swore impatiently. "Nonsense, man. You'd have lost everything. Do you suppose he would have kept faith with you?"

"You think what I think, Larkett. Don't let's gloss over the fact. You said yourself he was in love with her." Larkett felt the arm quiver through which his own was thrust. "Suppose he should get away? He might do anything—anything."

"Well, we've got him safe and sound, so there is no good discussing hypothetical problems," answered Larkett. He spoke off-handedly. "My car ought to be somewhere about here. Ah, there it is! Jump in, Jack."

He set himself to free Strang from his depression during the drive to Brixton, and the effort lightened his own mind. When they drew up in Lashbrook Road both men were in an easier frame of temper. The door of the house was opened by Grey himself. Larkett put a question.

"Quite all right, sir," answered Grey. "The Yard men turned up here after you had left, and they've been taking two-hour spells with him ever since. I've looked in now and again. I was up there half an hour ago. He was dressing then."

"He's cheerful, eh?" asked Larkett.

"More or less, sir. I put handcuffs on him at first. He complained that he wanted to undress and go to sleep afterwards, so as there were three of us, and me always with him, I thought there would be no harm in having them off. By the way, sir, you didn't say anything on the subject, but I searched him."

"Grey still has some C.I.D. habits, Jack,"

smiled Larkett. "I ought to have thought of that. Well, what was the result? Did you find anything?"

"The only things of importance were one or two cipher documents, sir. I've got everything sealed up. Would you like to see 'em now, sir?"

"Cipher, eh? No, presently will do. We'll go up to see the gentleman first."

Grey led the way up to the second floor and pushed a door open. "I didn't keep it locked because I kept dodging up—— Hallo!"

His jaw dropped and dismay spread over his features. Shaugnessy was nowhere in the room, and the detective who should have been in charge of him was lying at full length on the bed, tied hand and foot with the sheets, and with a handkerchief round his mouth. The situation needed no explanation.

They released the bound man. A piece of soap had been thrust into his mouth and kept in place by the handkerchief. He sat up and spat in disgust.

"Hurt, my man?" queried Larkett.

"Not much, sir. If I could have a drink—thanks." He gulped at the flask Strang handed him. "I thought I should never get the taste of soap out of my mouth."

"And now"—the Secret Service man's eye glinted ominously as he turned with sudden fierceness on Grey—"how has this come about?"

"I don't know, sir. It can't have been half an hour since I looked in. Was it?" He appealed to the other man.

"It happened just afterwards," said the detective. "He was washing, and dropped the soap. I stooped to pick it up when he came for me. He had me by the throat and I thought he meant to choke the life out of me. Faith, a very little more and he would have done. He's as strong as a bull. Not but what I could have put up a fight if he hadn't caught me unawares. I suppose I fainted. When I came round I was as you found me."

Strang clutched Larkett's sleeve and whispered in his ear. He had gone very white. The Secret Service man nodded. "Yes, yes, I know."

He addressed Grey sternly: "We'll find out who's to blame later. Let's have a look at these cipher documents you spoke of. Then 'phone through to Scotland Yard and tell Mr. Lever Shaugnessy is gone."

He studied the two or three sheets of paper and the apparently meaningless hieroglyphics scribbled on them with some care. His profession demanded some knowledge of ciphers. Presently he began working out a number of figures and letters on a pad. Once he paused to light a cigarette, and his brow was wrinkled in thought.

"Anything I can do?" asked Strang. He was tired of the rôle of spectator.

"Not unless you can tell me what that means." Larkett handed him one of the cipher messages. Strang puzzled it through. It read:

"QFUXAKFU. YO. FF. CIDVFUXEH. MGQLEOEJ. HSVUJ. MISNJTSO."

"I can't make head or tail of it," he said. "Isn't there any way to read it?"

Larkett tapped with his fingers absently on the table. "I can guess what cipher has been used," he said. "That's a different thing to reading it. This is one of the most simple to use and most difficult to decipher that is known. It was invented either by a Count Gronfeld or a General Tinhu—I am not sure which. It is used with a key number."

Strang recalled vaguely all that he had ever heard and read about ciphers. "There's surely some way of decoding it," he said. "Can't you find out which letters occur most often, and so on?"

"Not a bit of good in this case. That works all right when each letter of the alphabet is fixed more or less. In this cipher the letter A might be represented by each letter of the alphabet in turn."

"If there's a key number Shaugnessy would keep a record—he wouldn't trust to his memory."

"Just what I was thinking. Let's see." He raked through the pile of articles which Grey had placed before him—keys, watch, letters, money.

"He would scarcely keep it where it would be mislaid. Now, I wonder?" He snapped open the watch. "No. 41250. Let's try that."

For five minutes he worked assiduously with pencil and paper. At last he finished, and sat back with a sigh of relief. Strang was looking

over his shoulder. The sheet of paper he had written on bore the following:

QFUXAKFU	YO	FF	CIDVFUXEH
41250412	50	41	2504125 04
MESSAGES	TO	BE	ADDRESSED

MGQLEOEJ	HSVUJ	MISNJTSO
12504125	04125	04125041
MELLANCE	HOUSE	MERLETON

"One for you, Jack," he said, with a touch of buoyancy. "Simple enough, isn't it? Take the two S's in messages. The first one you have to add the next two following letters of the alphabet to: S—T—U. It becomes U. The next you add gives five letters, and it becomes X. Now you understand, you might help with these others."

They turned their attention to the remaining documents. These were longer, and, even with the key, took an appreciable time to decipher. They were long instructions on various subjects, but there was no word in them that would serve their present purpose. Strang's face showed his disappointment. Larkett hummed a tune as he carefully stowed away messages and translations in his breast-pocket.

"I can almost forgive Grey for this," he said. "I would rather have these things than Shaugnessy, though, of course, we ought to have both. Why, it gives away the whole system of German espionage."

"That address—it may lead to something?" queried Strang.

"I believe it will—I have a feeling in my bones. We mustn't lean too heavily on it, though. Where is Merleton? There ought to be an 'ABC' somewhere. Here, Grey, is there an 'ABC' in the place? Or, better still, a gazetteer?"

"Both, sir. I will get them. There's someone wants to speak to you on the 'phone in the lower room."

When Larkett came back Strang had his finger at a point in the gazetteer. "There's no railway station at Merleton," he said. "It's a little village down in Hampshire, about seventy miles from London."

Larkett looked at him doubtfully. "We can try it, as a long shot," he said. "I've got to stay in London for an hour or two at least. I mustn't miss Cotton. And yet, with Shaugnessy at large, every minute may be precious. There's my car outside. Do you think you'd like to run down? I'll follow the minute I am able. There's Lever's men here doing nothing. They might go. With the chauffeur, that makes four of you. I'll follow the minute I'm free."

Strang jumped to his feet. "I'll go now!" he declared.

"Take it coolly, Jack. Whatever you do, don't lose control of yourself. Should the girls be there—and we've got to remember that it's only surmise that they are—don't do anything rash. Unless there is urgent necessity,

all you have to do is to watch things till I get down."

"I'll be discreet. You needn't be afraid of me," promised the other readily. "Where are those men?"

The detectives, obedient to a brisk order from Larkett, were already struggling into their overcoats. They followed to the car and took their places. Strang went to the front.

"I believe I'll drive myself," he said. "It will be something to do. Well, good-bye, Larkett. Start her up, my man."

The latter words were addressed to the chauffeur he had displaced. The engine swished into a whir at the turn of the crank. The chauffeur swung himself up by Strang and the great car rushed on.

Bareheaded, Larkett waited till he saw it take the corner, slithering round on two wheels in a manner that showed Strang's determination to get every ounce of speed out of it.

"Bad for the tyres," murmured the Secret Service man automatically, thinking of the car. "He'll lose no time in getting there, if he doesn't break his neck," he reflected. "I hope he'll keep his head." He shook himself.

"Pah! I'm taking it for granted that the women will be there. I've got my own affair to look after. I'll settle up with Cotton now. Not that there'll be any harm in asking Winter or Lever to take a trip after that young man."

He pulled the receiver from the telephone.

CHAPTER XXXI

KENNINGTON is one of those neighbourhoods that have seen better days. Time was when prosperous City merchants inhabited austere houses within its precincts, but now, though relics of its old respectability remain, it has become a suburb of shabbiness. A great part of its residents have descended from Brixton or ascended from the Borough, and there is a never-ceasing demand for " Apartments-to-Let " cards.

Larkett had walked through a dreary tangle of side streets towards the address that had been given him by Cotton. At a corner he was addressed by a tall man who sauntered towards him. He held out an unlighted cigarette.

" Could you oblige me with a light, sir ? "

The Secret Service man rummaged in his pockets. " Well ? " he said.

" Gone out," answered the other in a low voice as he struck the match and held his hands round it to save the flame from the wind. " He came straight on here from Vine Street, and was here till after we rang up. Then he changed his clothes and came out. He was wearing a false beard and moustache. Rickett and Small are looking after him. We rang up again, but you

had started. Thought I'd wait here and let you know."

"That's all right," said Larkett; "keep hanging about."

He took back his matches, and passed along the street. He was a little disturbed by Cotton's absence, but not much. No time had been specified for an appointment, and the men who were shadowing Cotton could be relied upon not to lose sight of him.

Three or four steps led up to the front door of the house. In response to his knock, a slatternly woman, whose sleeves turned up to the elbows and arms from which the soapsuds had only been partially wiped gave evidence of the occupation at which she had been disturbed, appeared.

"Mr. Cotton?" she said. "Yus, 'e does live here."

"Can I see him?"

"He ain't in now. A gentleman called just now, and is waiting for him."

"I think I'll wait too, if you don't mind."

He could see the doubt that crossed her mind in her face, and his hand slipped into his pocket and jingled some coins.

"Mr. Cotton's very particular," she objected. "'E don't like people waiting abaht for him. If it 'adn't been that he told me to let in a gentleman who was coming by appointment, I don't know that I'd have let in the other gentleman. You never knows in these days." She wiped her hands on her apron.

A half-sovereign gleamed in Larkett's fingers. "So the other gentleman had an appointment?" he said. ,' That's curious, because I've got one too. Mr. Cotton and I are old friends."

Her eyes dwelt wistfully on the coin. "I'll take you up, if you like, sir," she said. "Come in. Mind, there's a loose board there. Thank you, sir." The half-sovereign changed hands.

She stood aside two or three steps from the first landing and waved a hand towards a door. "That's the room," she said.

Larkett felt a sharp curiosity as he thrust the door open. The mention of a previous visitor vitally interested him, though he felt little alarm. There would be very few people who knew that Cotton was at large. He had purposely refrained from questioning the woman. Although he did not think it likely that Scotland Yard would now take any steps to retrieve Cotton, there was always the possibility. It was not out of the bounds of chance that Winter might have started afresh on the trail, if only for the purpose of keeping an eye on Cotton.

But now, as he viewed the disordered room in which there was no one visible, a quick, fresh idea came into his mind. He stepped to the landing and arrested the woman in her descent.

"There's no one here," he cried.

She returned, muttering: "Now there's no being up to tricks nowadays. 'E can't have bin after the gas meter, 'cos that was cleared yesterday." She had gone into the room, and faced

Larkett with her hands on her hips. "It's a fair licker, that's wat it is."

There was no difficulty in following the working of her mind. She assumed that the missing visitor had adopted a ruse to gain entrance to the house for some nefarious purpose, though it was hard to discover anything in the mean interior that would have tempted the most hard-up of thieves. She waved a hand about the room. "Fair turned the place upside down 'e has. Well, it's Mr. Cotton's look out. 'E can't have touched anything of mine. If Mr. Cotton can't choose 'is company better, it's his business. I s'pose it means bringing the pleece in, and me a respectable, hard-working woman——"

With a patient auditor it was obvious that she would ramble on indefinitely. Larkett cut her short.

"Perhaps it's not so bad," he said. "The gentleman may have got tired of waiting. It may be that Mr. Cotton has himself been looking for something. What sort of a man was this man who came? A fat chap, dressed in blue serge and wearing a bowler hat?"

She nodded vigorously. "That's 'im."

"Then it's all right. He's no burglar. He's a friend of Mr. Cotton's. You can rely that he just went away because he got tired of waiting. I'll tell Cotton."

The landlady might have revised her opinion of the second visitor had she beheld him when her footsteps receded to the bottom of the stairs.

Larkett began a steady and systematic search, beginning with the mattress of the tumbled bed. He moved quietly and quickly, but nothing rewarded his vigour. Presently he sat down mechanically, lit a cigarette, and, crossing his legs, composed himself to thought.

He had no doubt that somehow Shaugnessy had been in advance of him. The watchers had been told merely to keep an eye on Cotton—their instructions had not covered this contingency. If any of them had known Shaugnessy, they might have acted on their own initiative, but a fat man calling at the door of a lodging-house would have no significance for them. There was nothing to connect him with the object of their vigil.

Although the Irishman had called after Cotton had gone out, there might have been some pre-arrangement. Was Cotton playing false? The Secret Service man's lips set grimly. Although he now knew of the overnight meeting of Shaugnessy and Cotton at the Regal Theatre, the former might know nothing of the arrest or escape.

Or again, if he knew of the arrest, he could not by any possibility have learnt that Cotton had regained his liberty. Cotton had not carried copies of the plans. They must have been hidden somewhere in his room. Larkett's heart thumped with unusual quickness as he considered the possibility that they had already passed into Shaugnessy's possession.

His abstraction was not so complete that he

failed to notice a slight, stealthy movement outside the closed door. His senses were alert on the instant, but he continued to sit. The sound of a movement was not in itself a suspicious thing. But an authorised occupant of the house would have moved boldly, with certainty. This was as though someone were trying to walk softly, and the creaking boards had remonstrated. The step was unmistakable. Again that creak of the boards.

Larkett stood up, and in his turn began to move quietly. He had an advantage over whoever was outside, for the room was carpeted, whereas the landing and the stairs were bare boards. In three delicate steps he reached the door and pulled it back sharply.

From the second step Shaugnessy looked upward. An open door along the passage told whence he came.

For a second or two both men remained silent and motionless. Then Larkett spoke. He was perfectly cool and nonchalant. "So it's you, Shaugnessy?"

"Yes," agreed the Irishman. "I wish you good-morning, Captain Larkett; I am in a hurry." He descended another step.

The hand of the Secret Service man dropped to his right-hand overcoat pocket. Shaugnessy caught the movement. He paused and grinned. "That's no good, Larkett. This isn't an empty house. You'd raise a pretty hornet's nest if you came any funny business. You daren't

shoot. In fact, you daren't do anything. Why don't you go back and wait patiently for Cotton ? "

Larkett withdrew his hand. A police whistle dangled on the little finger. He held it up. " That's all there is to it, Mr. Shaugnessy," he said. " I don't need to shoot, but I may tell you, the street is blocked at both ends. Running will do you no good."

It was the best threat he could think of in the circumstances, but it had no effect on the Irishman. A run for it could make it no worse than tamely climbing down to the Secret Service man. He shook his head heavily, and slowly and ponderously, no longer trying to deaden his footstep, descended the stairs.

" That cock won't fight," he said. " I've had time to arrange one or two things myself since we last met, Captain Larkett. There's Lady Malchester. Touch me now, and guess what will happen to her."

Larkett ran lightly down the stairs, catching the other at the bottom. He more than suspected that Shaugnessy at that very moment had the plans in his possession. He nodded lightly.

" I'm afraid you've got a poor opinion of me, Shaugnessy. You don't really think you can carry this off by any bluff."

" Bluff ! " echoed the Irishman, halting and turning to face the other. " You just call it, and see my hand."

Larkett's lips set. " I will," he said. " Why,

you poor fool, do you think that my personal feelings make any difference ? "

" Getting angry already," sneered Shaugnessy.

It was true. The taunt rallied the Secret Service man's self-control, and he smiled cheerfully.

" I'll walk with you a little way, if you don't mind," he said suavely. " I suppose you heard me come in."

" I heard your voice on the stairs," admitted Shaugnessy. " You're very slow, sometimes, Captain Larkett. I had a choice of three bedrooms in which to hide."

He came to a stand as they reached the street. " Which way are you going ? " he asked. " Because I shall be going the other."

" Why shouldn't we go together ? " asked Larkett genially.

" Oh, because——" said the Irishman.

" Well, we'll see," said Larkett. " I have no wish to lose sight of you yet, my friend."

Shaugnessy shrugged himself and moved on with an air of indifference. The other set his pace to keep alongside. He was still undecided what course of action to take. The easy way would have been to have called assistance and then placed the spy under arrest. Yet, somehow, Larkett was unwilling to force events. The threat to Lady Malchester had had more effect upon him than he would have cared to acknowledge even to himself.

At the corner the man who had begged Larkett

for a light was still loitering. The Secret Service man made an unobtrusive gesture with his hand, and the other, crossing the road, began to follow on a parallel course.

So they proceeded to Kennington Road. The Irishman had hitherto been grimly silent. Now he came to a halt near a point constable, and addressed Larkett in loud tones, with every appearance of heated annoyance. "I tell you I won't lend you a penny. I won't be annoyed in the public street like this. I tell you, if you don't go away I shall give you in charge."

He glared with dignified indignation at the Secret Service man. It was admirably done, and for the instant even Larkett was taken aback. Whatever defects of character Shaugnessy might have, his nerve was consummate. He knew that it was touch and go whether he would be immediately denounced as a spy. He had put Larkett in a position where he had to make his decision without pause.

If the Secret Service man had been certain that Shaugnessy had found the plans, possibly he would have done other than he did. The C.I.D. man, engrossed in idle contemplation of a shop window (with a mirror at the back), could be trusted to hang on to the spy with bloodhound tenacity. It was not likely that Shaugnessy would suspect a shadower once he had shaken off Larkett. Lady Malchester swayed in the balance. Supposing she was not at Merleton, the quickest and the easiest way was

to watch Shaugnessy. If things looked too dangerous, he could always be arrested. Larkett took the chance. He laughed.

"That's very well done, Shaugnessy," he said. "You've got me beat again. I'll go. We will meet at Philippi."

He crossed the road with more than a little doubt in his mind. The Irishman boarded a tramcar, unconscious that Larkett's emissary had swung up behind him. He waved an ironical farewell through the window.

Larkett retraced his steps towards Cotton's abode. On reflection he became more pleased with the way matters had fallen out. If Shaugnessy really had got the plans it would be possible to keep in touch with him. If he had not, there was still no harm done. At any rate, Jack Strang had a good start to Merleton, and there was little doubt that that was where Shaugnessy would ultimately make for. Betty Carstairs was there.

A telephone sign was displayed outside a newsagent's shop, and Larkett went within. In two minutes he was talking to Lever. His phrases were elliptical for fear that the box might not be sound-proof, but when he laid down the receiver he was sure the detective understood.

"That's all right, then," he said. "Within the hour, yourself and half a dozen men."

"Myself or Winter," said Lever. "We'll be there. And I'll pass the word to have a bright look out kept in London."

" Good man," said Larkett.

He glanced at his watch as he left the shop. It had gone twelve. And then a little man with a dark pointed beard almost ran into him. " You been looking for me, guv'nor ? " he said.

" That you, Cotton ? " said the Secret Service man imperturbably. " Yes. I've been wondering where you had got to. Have you got the goods ? "

" Bet your life, guv'nor," answered Cotton, " if you've got the other stuff."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE two men walked side by side back to Cotton's lodging. It did not appear to occur to Cotton that his disguise had been penetrated with absurd ease by the Secret Service man. He had, in all probability, entirely overlooked the fact that he was supposed to be in disguise. The recognition by Larkett he took as a matter of course.

Larkett did not permit his hopes to soar too high. He was by no means convinced that relations had been absolutely broken off between Shaugnessy and Cotton, though there was nothing certain about any hypothesis. He held a very strict guard on himself.

Once he contrived to take a casual glance behind. The men instructed to watch Cotton were following, one a dozen paces behind, the other twenty or thirty paces behind him. He would have liked to get a word to them, but the attempt might have aroused Cotton's distrust. He ventured a shot almost at random.

"I met a friend of yours just now—Mr. Shaugnessy."

Cotton showed his teeth in angry wolfish surprise. Larkett noted his astonishment with some satisfaction. If it was assumed, the other

was a great natural actor. He began to believe that the threats which, according to the report of the Scotland Yard men, had been directed against Shaugnessy when Cotton was arrested were inspired by a genuine hatred. It was a small point, but it was as well to know there had been no fresh collusion.

"That dog!" growled Cotton. "He's no friend of mine. If I set eyes on him——" His lean hands twitched, and he did not finish the sentence.

"Bad as that, eh?" commented Larkett. "I thought you were on good terms. Anyway, I believe he wanted to see you—but he couldn't wait."

"What's that?" Cotton stopped abruptly in his stride, and his pale face had gone livid with excitement. "Where did you see him?"

"At your lodgings. He——"

But Cotton had broken into a run, dragging the Secret Service man by the sleeve. He cursed incoherently when he stood in front of his door and fumbled in his pockets for a key. He had forgotten that along with certain other belongings of his it remained in the custody of the police at Vine Street.

Finally he plied the knocker, putting all his nerve tension into reverberating crashes that filled the street with sound. The terrified face of the landlady looked up at them through the area railing. She did not recognise her lodger in his beard and moustache,

" Is it fire ? " she asked anxiously.

Cotton spat a mouthful of curses at her. Her bewilderment increased, and she stood with soapy hands on her hips with indignation flushing to her face. His disguise, crude though it was, had not been penetrated by her. Her lodger was a smooth-faced man. It was hardly to be expected that she should recognise him in a bearded and angry stranger.

" Who are you talking to, you drunken beast, you ! What d'you mean by coming disturbing respectable folks like this ? You wouldn't dare talk to a man like this. I'll show you manners, you little beast. Wait till I come up. I'll teach you to abuse respectable women."

Cotton choked inarticulately and shook his fist at her. " You Jezebel ! " He tore the beard from his face in a frenzy. " Don't you know me now ? You can let strangers in to go through my room and keep me here on the doorstep. . . ."

She disappeared, and presently showed her red-eyed wrath at the front doorway. Cotton would have pushed by her, but she shoved him back with a brawny arm.

" You keep a civil tongue in your head, Mr. Cotton, and don't go calling me out of my name. How should I know you when you make yourself up like a Guy Fawkes and come back 'ere reekin' and smellin' of drink ? " (This was an exaggeration, Cotton was perfectly sober.) " For two pins I'd box your ears for you. Me who took

you cheap, as I thought you was a quiet, steady man. I tell you, what with your going and coming at all hours and sometimes stayin' away for days at a time, I'm sick of you. When my husband comes home he'll talk to you. And out you go this day week, bag and baggage. There."

Larkett deemed it time to interfere. The brawl was developing, for Cotton had a hair-trigger temper and just now was all of a quiver with nerves. Meanwhile time, which was so precious, was slipping by.

"My good woman," he said.

The virago turned her attention to him. "Oo are you callin' a woman?" Then she recognised him, and perhaps recollection of the half-sovereign assuaged her wrath. "Oh, it's you, sir," she said more mildly.

"Mr. Cotton is rather excited," explained the Secret Service man. "He fears that the fat man you let in this morning has stolen something. We are in a hurry. If you will let us pass . . ."

She abandoned her attitude of aggression and squeezed herself against the wall of the narrow passage sufficiently to allow Cotton to dart through.

"Mind you, though," she added, as Larkett followed the other man, "I ain't responsible if anything's gone. He said he 'ad an appointment."

In a fever of anxiety Cotton took the rickety stairs three steps at a time, and the Secret Service

man followed him closely. He tore open the door with frantic eagerness, and had jumped on the bed when Larkett entered. His hands quivered as he snatched down an oak-framed group photograph that hung on the wall.

"I put 'em at the back of this," he explained, struggling to withdraw the rivet that held the match-boarding at the back in place. "No one would ever think of looking here." He spoke as though trying to reassure himself.

He tore a finger and swore. Larkett passed him up a pocket-knife, and at last he withdrew the board. As he glanced underneath, the whole thing dropped with a smashing of glass. His pale face was suffused with crimson, and his eyes seemed about to start from his head.

"By the Pit, they're gone!" he cried.

Words failed him. He was seized with a gust of hot rage against which his previous outbursts were as nothing. Convulsive twitchings of his countenance gave him an aspect of murder incarnate.

When at last he regained control of his voice he spoke in a low, level tone in which there was a cruel, indefinable earnestness.

"If ever I set eyes on that fat swine again, by God he'll know it. If I'd met him here I'd—I'd not have left enough of his oily carcase to poison the dogs."

"You're sure they were there?" asked Larkett. The fatuity of the question struck him even while he uttered it.

"Sure?" screamed Cotton in passionate scorn. "Do you think I'm a fool? Of course I'm sure. I looked at them before I went out."

"Cool down, my man," advised Larkett, with a touch of authority in his voice. "We don't want to rouse the neighbourhood."

"And why not?" Cotton swung on him with a blasphemous oath. "What's it got to do with you, anyway? Who are you a-preaching at? You ain't been done out of a thousand. It's easy for you to talk. Done out of a thousand!" he repeated. "Oh, he must think I'm an easy mark." He flung both hands in a wildly dramatic gesture above his head. "I'll get him. I'll get him yet."

"Keep quiet, you madman," said Larkett.

"You shut your row!" The man snarled like a dog. Suddenly he thrust his face within an inch or two of that of the Secret Service man. "What is he? Tell me that, now. Nothin' but a dirty German spy. Well you know it. I can spoil his game, though. He'll find out whether I'm a mug or not. If I've got to swing, I'll see that he swings as well. Out of the way! I'll put the splits on him right away."

Larkett faced the frenzied man grimly, and a pistol showed in his hand. "You keep right where you are, Cotton, until you get a little sense in that mad head of yours," he said decisively.

The other made a defiant move, and the pistol sprang to a steady level. The Secret Service man was determined that things should not be

disarranged again by any impulsive action. Cotton halted, daunted for the moment.

"Listen to me," went on Larkett. "There isn't much for you to complain about. You've lost a bit of money, but you're free, aren't you? You're that much to the good."

He felt that Cotton's disappointment was out of all proportion to the sum he had been promised for the recovery of the copies, large though that was. But Larkett had had examples of the ungovernable fury that made Cotton little better than a madman at times. After all, the man was in intent at least a murderer, and though he had helped him to escape he had no personal sympathy for him.

"It's all very well for you to talk," growled Cotton.

"What I should advise you to do," pursued the Secret Service man quietly, "is to get out of the country as quickly as you can."

"How the blazes do you think I can get out of the country?" demanded Cotton truculently. "Why, the splits would get me the minute I showed my face in a port. I'd be dead sure to be picked up if I tried to stow away, and as for working my passage, you know what kind of a chance that'd be."

His first access of rage had passed, and he was growing calmer with the realisation of his own peril. Larkett dropped the pistol in his pocket.

"That's your affair," he said coldly.

"Say, guv'nor, you'll have to help me," said Cotton.

Larkett had one hand on the door-handle. He was anxious to get away. "Why?" he asked coldly.

"Because you've got to," answered Cotton. He was like a hunted animal that sees the toils close about it. The money that had been promised him was essential for his escape. A penniless criminal stands no chance against a widespread organisation of police, as Cotton knew well. He had risked much to get the copies of the plans. Now he saw his last chance. "I've done my best, guv'nor. You can't leave me to it."

Larkett reflected. He was under no obligation to Cotton and he thoroughly understood the despicable, beastlike character of the man. Yet he felt that, after all, the fact that he had enabled the other to escape from the police constituted some sort of a claim. There was no question of the morality of the act in his mind. He thrust a hand in his pocket.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "I'll give you twenty pounds. That should be enough. You don't expect me to look after you now, do you?"

Cotton still held the pocket-knife which he had been lent. He dug the point into the top of a chair while he rested one knee on the seat. He leered cunningly at Larkett.

"That's no good to me. I'd like to know

who you are and what you wanted with those copies? You're on the same game as Shaugnessy, and you've got to pay me to keep my mouth shut. If the police get me again they get *you*. See."

Larkett's small body jerked into tense straightness. A note of command crept into his voice. "Now you're making a fool of yourself again—a bigger fool than you know; you've got no right to expect anything. Come now, is it twenty pounds—or nothing?"

The amount of money spent by the Secret Service in war-time is considerable, and there is not too harsh a scrutiny if value is received. But details have nevertheless to be supplied to certain discreet auditors, and though Larkett knew that £1000 would not be grudged if the plans were recovered, it was a different thing to pay that money without obtaining them. In that respect the Secret Service is severely business-like.

"You've got that money on you," said Cotton. "You said so."

"And it remains on me. You can take what I choose to give you, or leave it."

Cotton jumped with deadly purpose. The knife was clenched in his fist, not as an Englishman would hold such a weapon, but as it is used by the Latin races—point upwards as sword. So quick and sudden was the onrush that though Larkett had been prepared he was almost too late in stepping aside. His foot caught, and he

stumbled, bringing Cotton crashing down in his fall.

Instantly Larkett had writhed himself face upward and caught at the weapon-hand of his assailant. It taxed all his strength to maintain his hold, and once Cotton smashed him between his eyes with his free hand.

Although both were under the average size they were fairly evenly matched. Cotton had what might be called nerve force, something of that strange strength with which lunatics, ordinarily weak men, are endowed. Larkett, on the other hand, was always at a pitch of physical fitness.

The struggle resolved itself into one for the possession of the knife—Cotton striving to wrench himself free for a stab, Larkett holding on tenaciously and endeavouring to overcome the other. A chair toppled down as they writhed and rolled to and fro on the floor. Then a little table gave way and a couple of tawdry ornaments broke.

Someone threw open the door. The men had been fighting in silence, but now the air was rent with shrieks of "Murder!" and "Police!" The landlady had arrived.

Cotton's resistance suddenly collapsed. Larkett felt the strained arm grow passive and limp. His strength had given way utterly. The Secret Service man got to his knees and took away the knife.

"Get up!" he ordered. "Stop that noise,

my good woman. Can't you hear them at the door? Go and tell them it's a mistake—that there's nothing wrong."

Cotton got breathlessly to his feet. "'Fore God, guv'nor," he snarled, "it's a good thing for you she came when she did or you'd have been cold meat now."

Larkett was calmly readjusting his clothes. "You must find your own explanation of this affair," he said. "I'm going now."

"What about that twenty quid, guv'nor?"

The Secret Service man stopped. Then a smile came into his face. "Your impudence deserves it," he said, and laid two ten-pound notes on the table.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Those who accompanied Jack Strang on that whirlwind ride from London to Merleton never forgot the experience. A dozen times they skated on the verge of disaster and a dozen times luck or the skill of the young airman saved them. He was in no mind for dallying.

The great car had slid in and out of the London traffic like some swift animal panic driven. When he slowed he did so with a jerk, only because he was compelled, and then recklessly forward again.

More than once a shrill whistle behind or a policeman standing with uplifted arm warned them to stop, but they took no heed. The chauffeur, huddled by Strang's side, once made a tentative offer to take the wheel. Strang rapped a curt refusal, and with a sigh of resignation the chauffeur folded his arms and waited for the smash that he began to think was inevitable.

But no smash came, and they thundered at last into Merleton—one straggling street of cottages which called itself a village by virtue of a church, a public-house, and a small general shop. It was at the latter that Strang stopped the car.

He beckoned an ancient corduroyed labourer to him.

"Is there an hotel near here?" he asked.

The labourer laid down the faggot he was carrying and removed his cap as though to give his brain more freedom for an unusual effort.

"There's the 'Three Kings'," he said. "They might gi' you a bite there. There bain't no other hotel nearer than Granley—a matter o' ten mile."

"You'll have to take the car on and book rooms for us there," said Strang to the chauffeur. He addressed the labourer again. "Do you know where Mellance House is?"

"Yes." The old labourer nodded sagely. "That be where Muster Quinnel use to have a shootin'. Some new folk 'a got it now. It lies out yonder." He pointed vaguely. "You go about a mile furder on till you come to a white gate, and then you go on a bit furder and turn to the left. That'll run you into it."

"We can get there by car?"

"Well, you might. 'Tain't a good road, and they keep the gates mostly locked. You'd get there as quick by walking. Be you a friend of the party that's got it?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, 'tain't for me to say nothin', sir, but I should let 'em know before you 'tempt to go up. They be mighty careful about lettin' folk in, and even when they wants anything they send for it. There be two or three a'mighty savage dogs up there, and young Grenfold nearly got a charge of shot in him t'other night. He says he warn't settin' a wire, but there aren't no other business that could take him into the place."

"You know of no young ladies staying there, I suppose?"

"No, sir. I ain't seen none. But that ain't nothing. There might be. The servants there are strangers, and don't mix much down here."

Strang let the car start more soberly. Larkett had warned him to have discretion, and the tale of the yokel showed him it was necessary. His own inclinations would have leaned to an immediate attempt at rescue by force. Surely the four of them could overcome any opposition that might be offered. But he was tacitly pledged to do nothing until Larkett came, and his better sense told him he must proceed warily.

At the "Three Kings" he stopped, and, with the two detectives, was shown into a little parlour of state, used occasionally by passing motorists. Here he gave his companions a rough idea of the mission they were engaged upon, telling only so much as was necessary.

"You say that chap who got away from Brixton has a couple of young ladies shut up here?" said one of them. "Do you expect him down here, sir?"

"He may have been in front of us."

The detective slapped his knee gleefully. "Well, I hope I get a slap at him in return for the way he manhandled me. I'd give a week's pay for the chance. What's the plan of campaign, sir?"

"We want to pick up as much as we can about the house and its inmates. Captain Larkett will be down later on and probably some of your

people from the Yard. I shall walk up to the place after lunch and see what happens."

"You'll excuse me, sir, but won't that be putting them on their guard? Wouldn't it be better to find out what we can in the village here first? You see, you haven't a warrant or any authority at all to use force. Now you might reconnoitre quietly with Jackson here, while I collect the village gossip. Then we shall be ready for Captain Larkett when he comes."

The advice seemed good, and it was acted upon. At three o'clock Strang and his companion, avoiding the road that led direct to the house, broke through a tall hedge into a coppice and, keeping in its friendly cover, soon gained the point whence they could survey a great portion of the farm. The house itself was set almost entirely out of sight amid the trees.

Suddenly Strang drew his companion down under a clump of hazel. A man, gun under his arm and with a broad gamekeeper's bag slung over his shoulder, approached, followed by a big black dog, sniffing nose to ground. The keeper and the dog, if they held to their present way, would pass about twenty yards from them.

All at once the dog stiffened, and then, with graceful, easy leaps, came bounding towards them. An ejaculation came from the detective as the keeper's gun fell from the crook of his arm into his hands, and he bent forward tensely, following the direction of the dog.

That intelligent animal had stopped a little

distance from the hazel clump and was growling ominously. Concealment was no longer in question. Strang and the detective stood up. They found themselves looking into the muzzle of the double-barrelled gun.

"What are you doing there?" demanded the keeper gruffly.

"That's our business," answered Strang shortly. "Put that gun down. It might go off."

"I'm going to make it my business," said the keeper. "You're trespassers. Watch 'em, Floss." The black dog snarled as if in assent. Strang swore under his breath. Jackson inclined his head nearer. "You take the man on," he whispered. "I'll attend to the dog. Now."

Man and dog leapt at the same moment, and the detective, dropping his hand to his jacket pocket, fired through the cloth. There was no chance to miss, and the animal, checked in mid-air, fell clumsily, growling and snapping. Strang, with head bent, had not yet reached the keeper, who, with gun to shoulder, fingered the trigger irresolutely.

Before he could make up his mind the gun was knocked out of his hands and a swift uppercut had dropped him to the turf. The detective, a smoking pistol now clutched in his hand, came running. He wasted no time, but dropped with one knee on the prostrate man's chest.

"Quick, sir!" he said. "Anyone may be coming along, if they've heard the shot. Have you got a bit of string? Anything will do. A

handkerchief? That's the idea. Help me twist his hand round."

With the aid of Strang, he tied the keeper's wrists. Then he rose to his feet, while the airman jerked the keeper up by the collar. Together they dragged him back into the shelter of a coppice. Then he was forced down till he sat with his back against a slender ash-tree.

"That was a beauty you got home on him," chuckled the detective. "He must have felt as if he had been kicked by a horse. He feels a bit silly now, too, I'll bet." He shook the keeper by the shoulder. "Listen to me, you. I'm a police-officer. I don't know what else there may be against you, but at least I can take you for obstructing me in the execution of my duty. Do you know that?"

The keeper blinked up at him. "How could I tell you were a policeman? You were trespassing, anyway."

"Leave this to me, Jackson," interposed Strang. "Now, you—what's your name?—Boswell? You know what we're here about, don't you? Oh, it's no good shaking your head. By to-night your friends will all be safely where they belong. You can't stop it, but you may help yourself a little by helping us. There are two young ladies in that house?"

"Yes, there is." The keeper spoke sullenly.

"That's good. You've got a little common sense, I see. Tell me, is Shaugnessy there?"

Boswell writhed. His ill-favoured face wore

a look of apprehension, as though he had been affected by the name of Shaugnessy. " Don't ask me anything, sir," he said almost entreatingly. " He'd kill me if he knew I'd given anything away. You don't know Mr. Shaugnessy."

" Don't I ? " said Strang grimly.

" How many men are there about the house ? " asked the detective.

" Seven now. I mean—I don't know. I won't tell you anything." He set his lips resolutely.

They plied him with questions, but to each he returned a stubborn, determined shake of the head, afraid apparently to trust himself to speak. It became evident that nothing further was to be gained from him. Strang drew the detective aside. " What can we do with him ? " he asked. " It means that one or both of us are tied down to watch him."

" We can take him back to the village, sir," said Jackson. " I take it we want to keep an eye on the house, and it would need two of us if he cut up rusty at all. And to take a prisoner there, anyway, would be to advertise matters."

" You'd better go back and get your colleague," advised Strang. " Then one can watch the place here and this man as well, and the others from different points."

" Very good, sir." The detective, accustomed to prompt obedience, started back. Not till he had been gone some five minutes did Strang realise the possibility that the shot which had killed the dog had alarmed the house. If any

of the little garrison which Shaugnessy had mustered came in force and found him, his position would be awkward. He examined his automatic pistol with as much philosophy as he could muster in the circumstances.

An hour had passed slowly away ere Jackson and his comrade came, bent double and worming their way through the undergrowth. The latter had gathered little of importance from his peregrinations in the village. He reported that the chauffeur had returned, having ordered rooms at an hotel at Granley, and that he had been left at the "Three Kings" in case Captain Larkett, or any Scotland Yard men, should turn up.

They divided forces, so that the house and its approach were watched as it were from the three points of a triangle. Strang left the keeper to the mercies of Jackson, and himself sauntered down through a piece of woodland to a point which commanded the entrance to the private road of Mellance House. Although they could not see all that happened in the house, they could at least be certain of observing all who entered or left.

It was a tedious, unbroken vigil, that lasted for hours, with no event to relieve the monotony. Darkness came as though someone had suddenly lowered a curtain between the earth and the sky.

From his point of observation Strang saw a light or two gleam where he knew the house stood among the trees. He wondered what Betty was doing.

Where was Larkett ?

CHAPTER XXXIV

At the cost of a third match, Strang was enabled to read the face of his watch. It was eight o'clock. The fear assailed him that in spite of his vigilance Betty had been again spirited away.

Somewhere a twig cracked. He turned noiselessly, and resting on his elbow, peered into the gloom. A dark shadow emerged from the trees, and Strang challenged softly. It was one of the detectives—Grenford.

"That you, sir? It was no good remaining where I was. I couldn't see twenty yards. I thought it would be better down here, in sight of the road."

The appearance of the detective confirmed Strang in a half-formed resolution. So far he had carried out Larkett's admonition of watchfulness and discretion to the letter. But he was weary, very weary, of waiting. All day he had kept a strong hold on himself, but now he had reached the limit. Something might have happened to Larkett, he told himself, and meanwhile a little initiative would probably be profitable. At all hazards he would make his way to the house.

"Grenford," he whispered, "you stay here.

I'm going up to that place. If I'm not back within a couple of hours, you must use your own discretion as to what to do."

"Better wait a little while, sir," advised the detective. "I don't know what the scheme is, but you might spoil things if you go butting in on your own. And with seven men about you might easily get hunked on the head."

"I'm going, nevertheless," said Strang doggedly, and slipping into the road climbed the gate. The detective hailed him in a hoarse whisper: "Get on the grass and crawl, sir! You'll get your knees wet, but you won't be seen so easily as on the road."

Strang obeyed without reply.

The road, unprotected by hedges, ran through the meadow for a quarter of a mile, dipping slightly, so that the house, even by daylight, would be hidden from view by a belt of oak and elm trees. Where the road ran into the belt was another gate. Once there Strang would be able to proceed erect, taking advantage of the cover.

The gate behind him clanked, and he stiffened on the turf like a rabbit. Whoever was coming held a key. Then the soft drone of a motor-car commenced, and looking backwards he saw the dimmed twin headlights rushing towards him. There was little danger that he would be noticed, but he lay very still as the car passed. He strained his eyes to see who sat in it, but without avail. He resumed his progress.

It must have taken him a full hour to reach the house. Once he passed within fifty yards of a man sitting nursing a gun on a tree-stump by the side of the road. But the man gave no sign that he had heard anything.

So at last he approached the house. He had no very clear idea of what he intended to do. That would depend on circumstances. He held his pistol in his hand and he prayed that the dogs might be elsewhere. They were the only things he was afraid of.

The motor-car stood at the door and he could see a couple of men standing by it talking. He skirted a shrubbery, his whole senses vividly alert. There was a burst of light from one of the side windows, and though he had to take the risk of being seen by the men near the motor-car he made his way towards it with infinite caution. The blind had not been completely drawn, and by stooping he got a glimpse through a half-inch slit at the bottom of the interior of the room.

In a big chamber facing him was the burly figure of Shaugnessy. Strang strained his ears and caught here and there a detached sentence.

"... other doesn't matter. Wring her neck if you like. ... Best thing ... tie her up and leave her. I've got all I want now ... can do no harm. Only thing to do. ... Get across the water as soon as possible."

It was a woman who answered. Her voice carried less than Shaugnessy's and Strang could

not make out the words, but the tone was remonstrative. He had no doubt it was Mme Levitska.

Shaugnessy shrugged his shoulders irritably and his voice was a key higher, so that Strang could hear more plainly.

"It comes to the same thing. If we're caught we've got our necks in a noose in any case. They can't do more than shoot us, and we're booked for that anyhow if they catch us. Don't you worry to coax Betty. There's no time to fool around. Every minute is precious. Gag her and get her bundled in the car if she makes a fuss. Whatever you do, woman, for God's sake, hurry! I only just managed to slip Larkett, and, for all I know, he may be after us by a matter of minutes."

The listener had heard more than enough. It seemed that, as he had acted, he was only just in time. He went deadly cold. Shaugnessy never knew that, as he stood up, just for a fraction of a second a pistol muzzle covered his heart. It was easy—so easy. The airman's finger contracted on the trigger and then slowly relaxed. It was altogether too cold-blooded for his taste. He lowered the weapon with a shudder, and the chance passed as Shaugnessy went out, followed by the tall form of Mme Levitska.

Cautiously the airman tried the window. It gave. He pushed the sash up an inch at a time, and cocking a leg over the sill entered the room. He paused, listening for a while at the door, and

then with stealthy tread stole out into the corridor. He had nothing to guide him, no knowledge of the house, or where Betty might be. But instinctively he made for the stairs. Wherever she was they would have to bring her by the foot of the stairs, and then——

He had been standing in the shadow of the banister perhaps thirty seconds. A door opened, and a slim grey-clad figure was outlined in the corridor. His heart slapped harshly against his ribs. Then he saw her face. It was not Betty; it was Lady Malchester.

She was singing softly to herself. As she drew near the staircase she saw him. She arched her eyebrows into an expression of surprise, but her song did not cease. She held up one finger in warning of silence, and then turning, beckoned to him. He followed her softly back into the room from which she had emerged. Still singing, she closed the door after him and leaned her back against it.

"You are Mr. Strang?" she said.

He nodded. It was no time for questions as to how she had guessed his identity. "You are Lady Malchester? Where is Miss Carstairs?"

"She went upstairs when the motor came. Shaugnessy is here. You know that, of course?"

"Yes, I know that. I saw him just now. He intends to take her away again—if he can."

"And me?"

He hesitated. "You? You are to be tied

up and left here. They will be looking for you now."

Lady Malchester bubbled over. "I knew it!" she gurgled; "I knew it! He has got the plans."

This was not what Strang expected. He shook his head, puzzled. "I don't know about that," he said doubtfully, "unless he obtained them after he left London. But we're wasting time. I must go to Betty."

She made a droll face at him. "Don't be so impetuous, Mr. Strang. Betty won't come to any harm. I'll tell her you stayed to flirt with me. She won't blame you."

Strang was in no condition of mind for flippancy. It seemed to him that Lady Malchester failed to appreciate the situation. "No, no," he protested. "I must——"

She held up a delicate forefinger in remonstrance. "'Sh! You'll only blunder about and make some blunder before you find her. Much better stay here and wait developments. Besides, I know where those copies are."

"You?" He halted.

She began unpiling a disorderly array of books piled on a table. From beneath them she unearthed a small dispatch-case.

"Shaugnessy would not be in such a hurry to bolt unless he had got what he wanted," she said. "He sticks to business. I guessed he had the plans when I saw how cheerful he was. Now what you say makes me certain." She held

out the case towards him. "He brought this in with him just now, and I managed to lay hands on it when he went to have his confidential chat with Madame. I was making a reconnaissance to be sure I should not be interrupted in trying to open it, when I saw you. You'll have to cut it open—it's locked."

"Good!" he ejaculated. "If you're right, these can wait. I'm going to find Betty."

Lady Malchester was a woman of pertinacity. She snatched the case from him. "I should like to shake you!" she snapped. "Keep here. You can only wait. Lend me your knife." She stabbed it viciously into the tough leather, and a moment later surveyed her hands ruefully.

"You try," she ordered peremptorily, and he obediently cut the lock away.

"There!" she exclaimed triumphantly.

One glance sufficed to show him that she was right. Clumsily executed on thin tracing-paper and bearing all the roughness of haste were the copies among a mass of other documents.

His hands trembled as he sorted out the diagrams from the other papers. Lady Malchester assisted him with alert, deft fingers. At last he had them completed. She quickly bundled the other papers together and buried them beneath the books.

"No time to examine these now. Captain Larkett will be able to say if they are important. Now how about these copies? You have the originals?"

"Yes."

"Then give them to me." She took them from his hand and advanced towards the fire burning in the grate. He made a half move to stop her, but she waved him back. "No. This is safest. We shall be sure they're out of his reach."

With the tongs she held them on the red-hot coals until they were utterly consumed.

CHAPTER XXXV

So engrossed were they by the destruction of the plans, that the quiet pushing open of the door failed to arouse their attention. Like so many heavy men, Shaugnessy walked quietly.

He stood for a moment taking in the situation, his little eyes darting hither and thither. The ruined dispatch-case on the floor told its own story, and a grunt involuntarily burst from his lips.

The man and the woman started. As Shaugnessy moved angrily forward towards them with a muttered ejaculation, he came to a jerky halt. The blue muzzle of Strang's pistol pointed steadily towards him. The Irishman's nerves had never been put to a profounder test than at that moment, and they served him well. His face became calm, inscrutable, and his voice as unconcerned as though passing a remark on the weather.

"You here, Strang?"

"As you see," retorted the airman. "Keep still, Shaugnessy. I should hate to cheat the hangman."

The Irishman made an ironical bow. "This is indeed a surprise." His eyes wandered to

the fire. "I seem to have arrived a little late —eh?"

"So sorry," drawled Lady Malchester, whose equanimity seemed not in the least disturbed. "We quite forgot to invite you."

"Ah!" He nodded condescendingly towards her. "It's you, Lady Malchester, of course. You have been an expensive mistake for me. I begin to wish I had wrung your neck at the start."

She curtsied. "Charming of you, I'm sure," she retorted.

"You shut up, Shaugnessy!" ordered Strang.

The Irishman stared steadily at him. "You look confoundedly melodramatic with that pistol, Strang. I'd like to know how you got here. 'Pon my soul, somebody's been asleep—unless you're responsible for a murder or two."

"Let's have less talking, my man," said Strang curtly. "You can guess the game's up. Put your hands above your head."

"I'm the approved style of the foiled villain of the moving pictures," sneered Shaugnessy, making no attempt to obey. "It only needs the heroine here to make the tableau complete. Somehow I don't fancy myself in the part, you know. Where's the gay and festive Larkett? Are you playing knight-errant alone this time—come to rescue the distressed damsel from the fearful clutches of the ogre?"

Lady Malchester had been thinking. "He's talking for time," she whispered.

Strang nodded understandingly. "We'll finish right now, Shaugnessy," he said.

"You think you're top dog, do you? You're a great man at self-delusion, Strang. Don't play heroics with that pistol. I've got you this time —not you me. You've upset my calculations as to the plans a little, that's all. But I've still got Betty."

He slipped back and a bullet crashed through the door as he flung it to. They heard his roaring voice in the passage.

"Instein! Carl! Here, quick!"

"I told you he was trying to gain time," said Lady Malchester.

Pistol upraised, the airman leapt after his quarry, flinging his weight against the door. Outside, footsteps were hurrying, and they heard the sound of guttural voices. Again Strang hurled himself against the door. It gave way suddenly, and he tumbled out into the arms of three men.

There was no space, nor if there had been, was he given opportunity to use his weapon. Someone had struck him fiercely between the eyes, and as he stumbled, a foot was deftly inserted between his legs, bringing him headlong. Instantly his assailants had him pinioned to the ground, and his convulsive struggles had no further effect than to exhaust himself.

"Take it easy," advised one of his captors, and they jerked him roughly to his feet.

"You fools!" cried Strang. "Let me go!

Where is Shaugnessy?" He strove vainly to wrest himself free.

From where they stood they had a clear view of the stairs, and a cry from the upper landing arrested his attention.

"Jack!"

Shaugnessy and Mme Levitska stood on the landing, and between them, held by the wrists, was Betty Carstairs. The Irishman roughly jerked the girl back as she took an impulsive step forward.

"Hang on to him, men!" he said. "Is that car ready? Ten thousand devils, what's that?"

A peal of the bell and a thunderous knocking at the great door resounded through the house, and then a slim white hand extended itself with a clutched pistol over the airman's shoulder. With the report of the weapon Shaugnessy gave a quick exclamation of pain and shook his fist downwards at them.

"You she-devil! I'll——"

A rush of feet interrupted him. He struggled momentarily to drag Betty away. Mme Levitska had vanished. Men were already upon Strang's captors, and the Irishman had a confused vision of blows being struck, of more and more men pouring into the place, and the tall figure of Winter making towards him.

He released Betty, and with a curse sprang forward. The superintendent caught his sleeve, but the Irishman tore away. Somehow he reached the door. Half a dozen hands clutched

at him, but he pulled himself free and tore straight out on to the drive.

"Never mind him," yelled Winter. "He can't get away. See to the others."

Larkett, leaping forward, a pistol in his right hand, flung a question at Strang in his stride as he passed.

"Burnt," shouted the other laconically. "Get Shaugnessy."

"We will," replied Larkett grimly, and plunged on.

Then Strang became oblivious to the whirl of events, for facing him, her arms wide open and with tears glistening on her smiling face, was Betty. He folded her to his breast.

It was only at Lady Malchester's third discreet cough that he turned. An automatic was held out towards him.

"Yours, I believe," she said.

"It was you who fired?"

"Yes," she said. "They'd forgotten all about your pistol. I picked it up. I was afraid that I might hit Betty, but I had to do something."

"You're an extraordinary woman," said Strang, tucking Betty's arm under his.

"I have always felt perfectly sure of that," she replied confidently.

Two detectives passed them, half carrying, half dragging a woman. They recognised Mme Levitska—caught, but defiant. She breathed out something as she passed.

"Poor woman," murmured Betty.

"You're getting sentimental, Betty," observed Lady Malchester. "I think I can find an engagement."

"Don't go," said Strang politely.

Lady Malchester surveyed them smilingly. Then of a sudden the smile faded from her face and she turned away.

CHAPTER XXXVI

In ten minutes the first turmoil of the police raid began to die down. The resistance had been more feeble than was expected, and in something less than ten minutes half a dozen sullen and frightened men were huddled under guard in one of the rooms. Mme Levitska, now smiling but taciturn, was with them.

Winter, perspiring and dabbing at his brow with a silk handkerchief, looked into the apartment where Lady Malchester had now rejoined Strang and Betty.

"Good clean-up so far," he said, "but Shaugnessy and one other man have slipped us somehow. They can't get away. There's a score of men all round the house with Lever and Captain Larkett, and the police and military for miles round are blocking the roads."

"You came just in time," said Strang.

"Yes," agreed Winter. "Your dashing on ahead like you did made us hurry matters a lot An affair like this takes some little arranging, and we were delayed at the start by"—he glanced at Betty—"by some news. When we found Grenford up at the gate he told us what had happened, and Captain Larkett insisted on things

being rushed. He was afraid you might get into trouble. No one's laid their fingers on those copies yet?"

"Lady Malchester." Strang nodded smilingly towards her.

"You don't say? Well, that's to the good. Where are they?"

"Oh, there's no need to worry about them," said Lady Malchester. "Mr. Strang and I felt that the quickest thing was the wisest. We burnt 'em."

Winter bent his big body in a bow, and his eyes were twinkling.

"Lady Malchester," he said, "we don't believe much in women detectives up at the Yard, but if ever you get tired of the Intelligence——"

She interrupted him quickly. "Don't run away with that delusion, Mr. Winter," she said. "I'm not a member of the Intelligence. I'm strictly an amateur."

"No, no, of course not." Winter was quick to take a hint. "I ought to have known that. Well,"—he brushed the subject aside,—"it's no good talking. I wonder if they've got Shaugnessy yet? They seem to be a devil of a time—I beg your pardon, ladies. Mr. Strang, can I have a word with you?"

Strang disengaged himself from Betty, and walked with the superintendent out into the passage. The latter softly closed the door.

"You ought to know," he said, in a low voice.

"Brockford died at midday to-day. I am not sure that we ought to tell Miss Carstairs yet."

"Dead?" repeated Strang blankly. Then he took out a cigarette and lit it thoughtfully. He had quite forgotten the financier of late. As he took in the significance of Winter's news his face grew grave. He could not disguise from himself that this was perhaps the best solution of a problem that would have had to be faced. Yet he wondered how Betty would take it. "No, you are right, Miss Carstairs ought not to be told at the moment."

"Frankly, it's as well for him and for her," pursued Winter. "If he'd lived he'd have had to face the music. He was as great a scoundrel as they make 'em. He could not run straight even in his treason, for he was playing his own hand against Shaugnessy. I was there when he regained consciousness, and we had a magistrate to take depositions. It was Cotton who shot him, of course."

Strang puffed at his cigarette without comment. The superintendent guessed at the turn of his thoughts. He laid a hand gently on his shoulder.

"So far as Miss Carstairs is concerned, Mr. Strang, there is no need that she should know any more of him than she already does. The man's dead. There will be an inquest, of course, but it will be on the esteemed financier—not on a German agent. No one's going to talk."

"Thank you," said Strang. "I—hallo What's that?"

A single shot had rung out in the grounds, followed by three or four others. The two men rushed back into the room where Lady Malchester and Betty were already at the window trying to pierce the blackness for some clue to the drama that was being enacted out there.

"All our men are armed," said Winter, as he looked over the airman's shoulder. "I'd like to be out there at the finish, but anyone moving about now is as likely to get shot as not. There —see?"

He pointed down towards the drive, and Strang, following his outstretched finger, saw a blotched shadow stealthily and rapidly cross the gravel towards the shrubbery which had concealed his own advance upon the house. A spit of flame and a thudding report showed that others had seen.

"If that's Shaugnessy, he's done," said Winter calmly. "We've got that shrubbery picketed."

Another shot and an oath came from somewhere within the cover. Strang's blood tingled as he watched the grim game of hide-and-seek. He even felt a sort of sympathy for the cornered spy.

"Shaugnessy!" Somewhere outside Larkett's voice was suddenly raised. "Shaugnessy! Come out, man. We're bound to get you."

A defiant laugh came from the shrubbery. "You're there, Larkett, are you? Guess I'll take my chances."

Somebody fired again, and they heard Lever's gruff protest, "Mind what you're doing. You'll be shooting some of us next."

"Listen to me, you men," shouted Shaugnessy again. "I've half a dozen hand bombs here. The man who gets in my path—ah, would you?"

Betty gave an involuntary cry, and a vivid flash of light and a crash that broke every window in the house showed that Shaugnessy had not lied. A second explosion followed hard on the first, and then a rattle of revolver shots and a groan.

"Somebody hurt," said Winter. "By James, I wish we could see better."

Again there was silence, all the more intense after the explosions. To the onlookers the strain on the nerves was probably greater than to those actually playing a part in the hunt. The rustle of leaves and the stealthy tread of men's feet were all that came up to them.

"God! Will nothing ever happen?" said Strang in a fierce whisper.

Another deafening crash came on the word, and a man broke back from the shrubbery on to the drive. Their eyes, more accustomed to the gloom, were now able to pick up more details. He was running almost double, and once he staggered and half turned as a second man dashed into the open after him.

"Captain Larkett!" gasped Lady Malchester. Her voice was hardly recognisable.

The spy stopped. His hand was poised above his head when Larkett fired.

A smother of flame broke upwards as Shaugnessy dropped, and a double explosion came.

"If Captain Larkett meant that shot," said Winter imperturbably, "he's a marksman. He hit the bomb. Hallo, what's the matter here?"

Lady Malchester had collapsed unconscious across the window-sill.

. . . . . .

It was half an hour before the detectives and Larkett had wound up all that remained to do, and meanwhile Strang assisted Betty with masculine clumsiness to attend to Lady Malchester. That unusually volatile lady at last opened her eyes listlessly.

"It's all right, Lady Malchester," said Strang cheerfully. "Captain Larkett is not hurt."

A twinkle of humour appeared in the grey eyes. "I'm pleased to hear that," she said, almost indifferently. "Silly of me to swoon like that, wasn't it? Oh, it was horrible—horrible."

"You're a great big idiot, Jack," scolded Betty. "Go away."

Lady Malchester sat up. "Please don't go, Mr. Strang," she said. "You're both wrong, absolutely wrong. No, don't try to hold me, Betty. I'm perfectly all right now."

Winter came in. "Well, that's finished," he said. "The other man was caught at the entrance. It's a good haul. Most of 'em

neutrals, of course, though one or two Britishers among 'em, I'm sorry to say. We've got 'em all away now. There's a regular armoury of bombs in one of the lower rooms. Lord knows how Shaugnessy got hold of 'em."

A couple of other men passed through the doorway. Strang found himself wringing Larkett's hand.

"Thank goodness you're all right, Jack. We were afraid we should not be in time."

"You ought to be thanking providence yourself," retorted the other. "A little while ago I thought I should never see you again—except in sections."

Larkett laughed. "Oh, that. I'll own I wasn't so cheerful myself. I aimed at his stomach, and caught the bomb above his head. Some shot, eh?" His eyes roved the room. "Where's Lady Malchester?"

She elbowed her way to the front, no trace of the recent strain in her dancing eyes. "Confess I *am* a clever person," she laughed. "You know, Mr. Strang and I burnt those things a minute before you turned up."

He bowed formally. "I always did admit you were clever," he said. "I have reason—more than ever now. Well, Miss Carstairs, I suppose we can congratulate Strang here. He's a lucky dog."

The girl slipped her arm through Strang's. Her blue eyes were shining, and now a glint of mischief appeared in them. "Thank you,

Captain Larkett," she said shyly. "And I suppose we may have to congratulate *you*."

The puzzlement in his face gave way to comprehension. Lady Malchester seemed to have lost something of her self-possession when his eyes again rested on her. "By Jove!" he exclaimed. And then, boldly, "Perhaps Dolly can tell you."

But Lady Malchester had swept haughtily out of the room. Larkett grinned a little shamefacedly, and followed.

They returned together five minutes later. Strang's eyes questioned him. The Secret Service man gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"We will accept congratulations," he said.

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